

Issue Twenty-Four

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YARF!

THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS



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COMING SOON

See the *Yarf!* staff behind the scenes
Morrigan gets her hair done
"Owner" · Gerald Perkins
"Night and Dance" · Patrick Spatz
...and other goodies!

FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from us to you and from you to us.

Who was it that said that getting something across to people requires telling them three times — tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you just told them...? Here at *Yarf!*, we have, through experience, come to firmly believe this adage. Sometimes it works: last issue, we once more asked for letters of comment... and got some. These make up the bulk of this issue's "Flaming Hairballs". Sometimes it doesn't: the same letters puzzle over things we've talked about in these editorials more than once. You can't win 'em all....

In that spirit, we'd again like to send a cry in the wilderness to readers who may have missed their back issue orders. Please, get in touch with us so we can straighten things out!

About those letters... we'd like to acknowledge a supportive missive from Dennis Province of Colorado Springs. Folks, even "warm fuzzies" help; if nothing else, they boost morale.

From Philip B. Smith of Reading, PA:

Here's another letter for you. If you do want more people to write to you, I think that you need to print letters in this 'zine, to give the fans their 15 minutes of fame. [To print 'em, we need to get 'em; to get 'em, we need to print 'em.... Help! — Ed.]

Monika Livingston: Wonderful, lively cover art. Is he Savage Squirrel's love child? [God, we hope not! — Ed.]

Kris Kreutzman: How did he hurt himself? [The way most amateur carpenters hurt themselves. He hit his thumb with a welders' hammer. — Ed.]

Jay Shell: Wild thing! You make the 'zine sing!

Waverly Pierre III: Great story! (You are now entering the *Yarf!* Zone.) Is there going to be more? [We think so. — Ed.]

Ken Pick: More glitter and glamor from the WebFed. Good stuff, but give me Hemingway and his "down to Earth" world any day. Brigit is a wonderful character; I just wish she didn't have that Godawful past. [But that's the point. — Ed.]

"Self-Less": What does it all mean? [See below. — Ed.]

Watts Martin: More of Man's Inhumanity to Nature. Not my cup of tea. I get enough of this sort of thing in the newspapers. (Did you see *Life*'s article about puppy mills?) So I'd rather not see it in this publication. [We can't please everyone. — Ed.]

Chris Grant: You know what I like! Still doing everything, I see. Good job, but the lettering could have been better. [Maybe we can please everyone. — Ed.]

That's all for now. Keep up the good work.

Here's a conversation captured from the Internet....

From Daniel J. Mitchell, somewhere in the UK:

I guess this should probably be reviewed along with a load of other things, but it's all that I've got that's new at the

moment (sigh), UK shipping schedules being what they are and all.

So. The front cover's nice, as anything by Monika is; that said, the perspective looks strange. Possibly that's due to the fact it's set on a hill, but the position of the skateboard relative to the ground seems odd.

"Freefall" / "Robert and Katrina" are as fun as ever; interesting to note that the "R&K" story is dated May last year, but I assume there's a reason for that. [Yes indeed. The idea originated then, but wasn't finished until recently. — Ed.]

"Big Electric Cat": Well, the art's by Jay Shell all right. Um. Is this song lyrics, or something? It's nice, yes, but seems somehow pointless. [Another yes indeed. The song is called "Big Electric Cat", but we don't remember who did it. Maybe it makes more sense if one has heard the song and seen the video. — Ed.]

Waverly Pierre's story's fun, if unfortunately predictable. Well written, though.

"Ralph the Wonder Hamster" is still appallingly laid out, and though the art's clearing up a little, it's still painful to read. The icky lettering doesn't help matters, either. [We think they're trying for an "underground comix" feel. — Ed.]

Ken Pick's story is as consistently good as he usually is; the WebFed universe is shaping up nicely. (Be interesting to see just what the Writers' Bible they mention contains.) [You're doomed to disappointment. :-) The Wormholes Writers' Bible is about a completely different universe, bearing no relation to the WebFed universe whatsoever. The confusion is understandable, though, since Ken is involved in both universes. — Ed.]

Now, it might just be me, but the Mark J. Paul/Greywolf story makes no sense. Load of people in the desert, wearing handcuffs. One of them grabs a hammer, with which he breaks a gigantic mirror on the top of some strange structure. They all break their handcuffs apart (or possibly they mysteriously fall apart as the mirror breaks — it's not clear, really). Eh? What on Earth is going on?

Watts Martin: Yup, he's still dead good. No surprises there.

Empires continues to introduce yet more cast, and forgets to keep us informed of what the huge arrays of people who previously appeared are doing, or what's going on in general. Heaven alone knows why Chris Grant (whose art benefits greatly from external inking; it's improved a lot from the past, but Jimmy Chin/Lance Rund/etc. al. help it a great deal) has got someone else to letter it; I can't imagine that his own lettering could be any worse than this. [We could fill a page on Chris' difficulties in getting *Ace of Spades* out. Despite this, he has never failed to make an issue of *Yarf!* We suspect the pacing problems are due more to "serialitis" than anything else: any story seems longer and more confusing when presented in small, serialized

tidbits. The collected chapters read much more smoothly. — Ed.]

The pinups/whatever-you-choose-to-call-them on single pages or bits of page around the issue are nice; the back cover is impressively sculpted-looking. Nice.

Not sure what my overall impression is; it's better than #22, certainly; but the lack of the "standards" is showing. (And why do they quote *Rufus the Red* with *Buffalo Wings*, "Freefall", and "Robert and Katrina"? It's very good, yes, but there've been, what, two "episodes" of it so far? The other three are all either in every issue, or near enough as makes no odds.) *[Rufus the Red is very popular with the US fandom, and has more history behind it than just its appearances in Yarf! Our citations were based on popularity, not frequency. While it's true that "Freefall" and "R&K" have been in every issue, Buffalo Wings has only appeared in a bit more than half the issues to date. We do hope it will be back soon, though. — Ed.]*

From Jordan Greywolf in Cedar Falls, IA:

Wondering when somebody'd get around to [covering #23].

Yah, I was trying to figure out the perspective on [the cover]. I still think it looks kewl, though.

Yah. Maybe if ["Big Electric Cat"] had some really spiffy music to it, it might be more meaningful. But, as it is, it doesn't even rhyme or have a pattern to it that I could discern.

You're right. It ["Self Less"] doesn't make any sense. Here's what happened. Mark J. Paul says he has a story that he'd like me to illo. That's back when I'm desperately looking for a story to illo that doesn't require me to draw entrails being strewn all over, or a couple of copulating critters. So, I say, fine, as long as it doesn't offend me (and knowing him, not likely it would), hey, I can illo a story for him. He was going to submit it to *Alpha/Omega*, a Christian APAzine. It's supposed to have some sort of religious imagery to it, but he wasn't able to successfully explain the allegory entirely to me. I didn't submit this story to *Yarf!*, incidentally. That it was published came as a surprise to me. However, I did tell Mark J. Paul that he could do with the story whatever he wanted to. After doing this story was when I decided that I'd find something better to do panels on than typing paper. You can

see where the ink bled into the paper all over the place.

[On the spot art:] I don't know why they called my picture "The Cord", though. Does somebody know something about this picture that I don't? [An object lesson in why we ask artists again and again to send titles with their art. (Some, notably Monika Livingston and Jim Hayden, among others, are good about titles, and we thank them.) We called it "The Cord" because of the mid-thirties Cord automobile dominating the piece. — Ed.]

Steve Arlow of Farmington Hills, MI offers this:

A single prisoner rebels, breaks his bonds, casts down the (military?) uniformed man who stands over them, but in the process is wounded over the heart. His selfless act of sacrifice is perhaps that, instead of replacing the oppressor's rule with his own, he set everyone free? But then, what does the mirror symbolize? And why is it tilted down at an angle? When the hero gazes at his own reflection, is he tempted by the promise of power, but sees in himself the prisoner he once was? Or does he see his darker nature reflected there, and destroys it? When he smashes the mirror, does he set the others free, or merely inspire them to break their own bonds?

As a final note... Going back to #21, "coming attractions" mention that John Perchalski would be helping with Chris Grant's *Ace of Spades*. That was our best information at the time, but (obviously) this didn't come about. We hope that it may yet come to pass, but for now there are no definite plans. Farther back, in #14, Ken Pick's story "Kill 23" was run without illos, despite tentative plans for John to provide art. (We suggest that a writer with a specific illustrator in mind make arrangements with the artist directly. *Yarf!* can supply some names and addresses if necessary.) We apologize for any inconvenience, and wish to make it clear — despite any rumors to the contrary — that John was not responsible for either incident. ☺

Deadlines (Oh no, not again!)

Remember, these are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice. *Yarf!* is, after all, a hobby, not a professional publication — the staff has real lives that occasionally interfere. We do encourage people to do this at home....

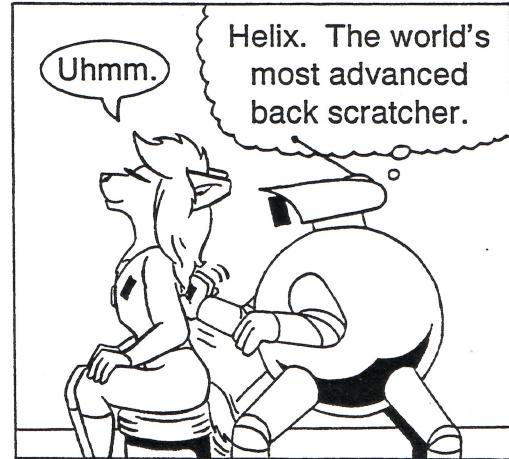
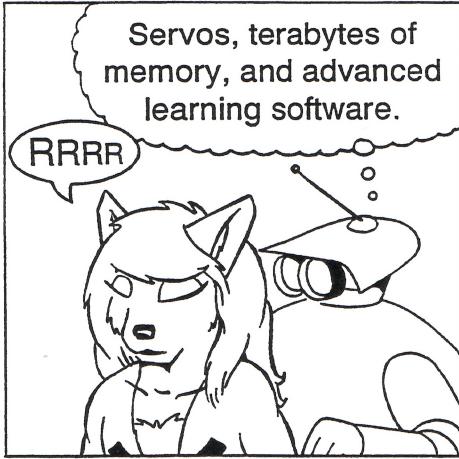
#25: 2 July 1993

#26: 27 August 1993

#27: 29 October 1993

#28: 31 December 1993

Freefall by Mark Stanley



Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten

More Sequels

These are more sequels to novels reviewed in past issues of *Yarf!*

Mariel of Redwall, by Brian Jacques. Illustrated by Gary Chalk. London, Hutchinson Children's Books, October 1991, 387 pages, £12.99; ISBN 0-09-176405-X.

This fourth Redwall novel also follows its author's formula. We learn that Redwall, the forest abbey where all animals live in peace, is near the seacoast. Mariel, a tomboyish young mousemaid, is brought to Redwall for healing after she has escaped from Gabool the Wild, "the dread Lord of Terramort Island, King of the Searats, Warlord of all Rodent Corsairs, Captain of Captains." (p. 5) Gabool's pirates captured her father's ship and killed or tortured everyone, and Mariel is determined to return to Terramort and slay Gabool in revenge. Meanwhile, Gabool is going mad and has begun to kill his own officers, whom he suspects of plotting against him. Greypatch, captain of the *Darkqueen*, decides to desert with his rat-crew, give up the sea, capture Redwall, and live as robber barons with the peaceful animals as their slaves.

Once again the novel splits into two parallel adventures, one involving a heroic quest and the other set at Redwall. Mariel is joined by the handsome mouse warrior Dandin, the witty rabbit troubador Tarquin, and the stolid young hedgehog Durry Quill. They have numerous near-fatal escapades with quicksand bogs, treacherous toads, a giant lobster, and similar dangers as they decipher the cryptic map that shows the way to Terramort. Meanwhile, Greypatch's scurvy gang is a laughable menace when compared to the evil armies that besieged Redwall in the earlier novels, but it is now many generations after the days of Martin the Warrior. The current inhabitants of Redwall are totally unfamiliar with having to defend themselves. Abbot Bernard quickly bars the strong walls against the swaggering rats, but how long can the naïve animal peasants and children stand against the sadists who know all the tricks of dirty warfare?

Mariel of Redwall stands on its own better than the third novel did, and it is a good one with which to start the series. But it does have a couple of annoying aspects. Nobody expects the villains to win, but the ghost of Martin the Warrior keeps appearing so often to help the heroes that there is virtually no suspense. And you need a thick dictionary of British dialects to follow the dialogue, what with the "Harr, shiver me timbers, matey" speech of the searats, the "I say, old chap, wot ho, pip pip, wot bally rot" of the rabbits, and the "Hurr aye, doant 'ee worrit, owd lad" of the moles and hedgehogs.

K-9 Corps: Cry Wolf, by Kenneth Von Gunden. New York, Ace Books, February 1992, 250 pages, \$3.99; ISBN 0-441-42495-3.

K-9 Corps III reads as though it were written by Calvin of "Calvin and Hobbes" fame. It opens with space scout Ray Larkin, his human partner Ake Ringgren, and their talking bioengineered scout-dog team buying a fancy luxury space yacht with the treasure they found in the second novel. They are just blasting off to return to Earth when they are attacked by a government battle cruiser and five single-pilot fighters, with all atomic cannon and lasers blazing! Oh, no! So there's this spectacular space battle with the spaceships zipping and zooming around each other, shooting rays and missiles and space torpedoes; and of course the troopers' shots all miss while our heroes' shots are all dead hits. Better yet, the space yacht turns out to have anthropomorphic weapons! Its robot missiles and torpedoes must've been programmed by a fan of centuries-old Earth movies like *Dr. Strangelove* and *Dark Star*. They spout lines like, "I am proud to report that I am fully operational and prepared to execute my instructions," and, "Open wide, Mama, this cowboy's home from the range!" as they home in on the Federation's fighters. (Don't ask if there's any reason for this battle; just lookit how exciting it is!)

That's in the first two chapters. The story goes downhill from there, after they arrive back on Earth and immediately have to fight all the military warlords and the killer punk biker gangs and the crime bosses who rule the cities, and the giant crocodiles and slavering bears in the sewers under the ruins of New York City, and the carnivorous multi-trunked elephant-squid, and the...

And the scout-dogs still talk funny. Somehow their "We love you, Ray! You our Man! We die for you!" dialogue isn't as endearing as it was in the first novel. It's gotten old; it's a *schtick* that's worn out and needs to be replaced by something fresh. An endless succession of battles with increasingly exaggerated menaces isn't it. ♡





Chrystal tapped gently on the door of the bath out of habit. Her guest couldn't have heard her in the shower. Ingrid Lytle had been a close friend since the Ryo-Vul War and shared in the deadly secret learned in the closing months of the war. Ingrid was on her way to perform her annual reserve military duty and Chrystal had invited her to stay at Honeyman Station. The flight from the Honeyman to the training center was faster than some instructors' ground commutes to far less comfortable quarters. Besides, the old mansion-fortress could seem terribly empty when Marc was away, even with the household staff in attendance, so Chrystal was glad for the company.

Ingrid stepped from the shower and into the fluffer. As the rush of warm air did its work, Chrystal laid out a pair of thick towels and a robe within easy reach of the door, as tradition dictated. In Shiryo's wet climate and icy winters, damp fur could be a death sentence, and the provision of dry towels and warm clothing carried a wish for long life.

Ingrid left the fluffer and passed by the towels, already being quite dry, picked up a brush, and began working the inevitable tangles out of her flowing blond hair. Chrystal couldn't help a somewhat envious glance. Ingrid had a dancer's body, lithe and muscular, most feminine in form. Her white fur gleamed in the bright light. The rats always set the standard of physical beauty among the Ryo. How Ingrid could have avoided a career as a fashion model was beyond Chrystal's understanding.

"Ingrid," Chrystal asked, "Why do you always put in for instructor pilot duty for your annual tour? I always heard it was hard duty and not much fun for a combat pilot."

"I've heard that too," she answered. "About forty percent of pilot aspirants never finish the course. Of those that do, the vast majority have fine, undistinguished careers. But a few have an ace in them and only need a little help to bring it into their hands, sometime between soloing in basic flight school and graduation."

"You always surprise me," Chrystal said with admiration. "You're always taking the unexpected path. Always so

independent. I'll bet you didn't need any help after your first solo."

Ingrid's eyes seemed to slip out of focus for a moment, no longer seeing her reflection in the mirror, but into her past.

"You know," she said, "I'm not sure I ever really soloed."

Chrystal was surprised. "Ingrid, you fly single-seat fighters. You always have. How can you say you never soloed?"

Ingrid didn't answer at once. She went over to the clothes hanger where a fresh blue service uniform rested and appeared to be remembering something she hadn't thought of in a long time.

"Well, Chrystal, it goes back to when I was a student, sometime between basic flight school and graduation...."

• • •

"Doesn't what I want mean anything?"

"Ingrid, we want what's best for you," her mother said. "You want what's best for you, and for our family. This union is for the best."

Ingrid bit off her retort and stalked out without another word. She grabbed an overnight bag in her room, jammed it with things that seemed important, and left the house. She had a little money, but the family controlled the finances. Nonetheless, Ingrid had made up her mind that she was not going to be mated with a man she had never even met. She'd go somewhere. Go it alone if she had to, escape from her family completely. But where could she go?

Going solo was not an easy or comfortable decision. With the Norge, the family controlled everything, even mating. There was simply no social support

structure for a runaway. The demand of the Norge society was "go home!" And when home became intolerable, for whatever reason, one either found a way into a new family, through mating or adoption, or became part of an underclass that the Norge refused to acknowledge.

She spent hours walking through the city. A single structure reaching a half-mile high and miles in any direction, the city could provide anything to its inhabitants. Except inde-

The Soloist

A "Nightfighters" Story

by Dave White



pendence. The city, like the family, was entirely interdependent. And like the family, the only way to be free of it was to leave it.

Ingrid found herself staring at a poster from across a narrow street. It was familiar; an Air Service recruiting poster that depicted a sleeping child and declaring, "Sleep well tonight. The Air Service is awake." Yet she saw it now in a new light. She focused not on the child, but on the streaking aircraft visible in the distance through her bedroom window.

The recruiting technician was a chipmunk closing in on his retirement date, but he had been assigned to Skand long enough to know what it meant when a rat tentatively entered his office alone. Usually, the Norge waited to be inducted into the Field Militia to perform their military obligation. When they came to the Air Service, it was commonly as a group seeking a better service environment—i.e., not in the mud. When one came in alone, it meant he or she was running away, rejecting the stifling society of the Norge. And those few could be as excellent as they were rare. He motioned her to enter and take a seat, carefully observing the etiquette that required the visitor to speak first.

"I wanted to ask about signing up," she said.

"Sure thing," the tech said with a smile. "We've got openings in all fields. Are you interested in electronics? Administration? Support services?"

"I want to learn to fly."

That was an unusual request. "Did you happen to bring your transcripts with you?" She had.

The tech gave them a quick once-over. "Your grades are certainly good enough. You shouldn't have a problem passing the requirements for a commission. But pilot training is a seven-year commitment."

Her eyes wandered toward the ceiling for just a moment, then fixed on him resolutely.

"How do I apply?"

A few days later, she left a terse message for her family informing them of her future whereabouts and boarded an intra-system shuttle for Shiryo and flight training. An hour more and she looked back to see her home world as a whole world for the first time. The little regret she felt was quickly submerged by stronger emotions. She was beginning a great adventure. She was scared. She was excited. She was just seventeen.

• • •

Feigangard Air Base was situated in a location perfect for advanced pilot training. Sited in Shiryo's "near-north," it provided weather with enough unpredictability to challenge young pilots, but not enough violence to kill them. It also provided thousands of miles of uninhabited tundra to crash into.

Lt. Col. Egan Vincent ambled away from the flight line chief's truck and toward the nose of a J-40 trainer. He wasn't

supposed to be flying this soon out of physical therapy, and he had called in a couple of favors to get this quasi-legal flight, applying the time-honored logic that flying squirrels should *fly*. He concentrated grimly to keep his cybernetic left leg from locking up. He considered the loss of his leg a small price, considering he had been protecting the rescue of a downed pilot at the time. The problem was getting the thrice-damned thing to obey. Its unpredictable behavior made his tail twitch annoyingly to keep his balance when he walked. The doctors said it would straighten out in time. "Personal magnetic fields" and such nonsense. Egan knew a cantankerous machine when he encountered one. He was beginning to think he'd be better off with a leg whittled from an old bedstead.

He climbed up the pogo ladder with some difficulty, but got into the cockpit with no trouble. Checklists done and engines started, the ground crew pulled the chocks and the line chief himself waved him out of the parking spot and snapped a salute as he taxied past.

The J-40 was all a pilot could ask of an advanced trainer. Fast, rugged, responsive and forgiving of all but the grossest error. It had all the performance of the best in-atmosphere fighters and vectored thrust for maneuvering that mimicked the sort reserved for free space. The tandem cockpits allowed the close supervision flight students needed before the next step in their development: Simulated combat, on their own.

Egan gained altitude and then put the nose down sharply, beginning a series of maneuvers that pressed the limits of ship and pilot. High-G turns, loops, switchbacks and crazy eights. Eyeball-squashing climbs to altitude followed by crash dives to the deck, and topped off with a low-level run that first chased the birds out of the trees, then chased them across the ground.

Abruptly, the trainer curved back toward the base. It landed assedately as an airliner. Egan parked as directed and waited for the pogo ladder to be placed under the cockpit, then waved the ground crew away. He perched his helmet on the instrument panel hood and sat for long minutes, staring into the sky just above the hangar roofs, occasionally tapping his fingers on the edge of the open canopy, reviewing and reliving each moment of the flight. At last, he clambered down from the cockpit and hiked the half-mile to operations to turn in the ship.

As he changed from flight suit to his service uniform, he paused and looked closely at the insignia just above the left pocket. The silver hornet's wings were the badge of the combat pilot. The fine veins in the wings were visibly worn from being pinned on thousands of freshly cleaned uniforms, but the enamel disc in the center, a depiction of Iroko, was still as bright as the day he'd bought them. Yielding to time, or standing adamantly against it. Which was more correct?

Something wasn't right. He had just flown as hard and as flawlessly as he ever had in his life. Yet something wasn't as it should have been. Something was gone.

Col. Shea's jaw dropped when he saw who had just barged

into his office. Egan Vincent was the last person he expected to see walk into the training command's halls. While everyone agreed with the importance of pilot training, no one wanted to be the one to do it. Puttering around the sky with a nervous trainee was anathema to a real combat pilot. Except for the final phases of combat training, the instructors wore the honeybee wings of combat support pilots.

"By my Faith, Egan, I thought you were still in the hospital," the colonel said.

"I was, yesterday," Egan replied. "I chiseled a check flight this morning. And I just had myself downchecked from combat status."

Shea looked at him hard and nodded. He understood.

"What can I do for you? Just name it."

Egan smiled sheepishly. "I need a job. Who's been having trouble?"

"There's a bunch, as usual," Shea said, indicating a stack of datadiscs. "There's a terminal in the conference room, through there. Help yourself."

Egan dropped heavily into a chair, his leg refusing to bend right away, and began feeding the discs into the terminal. Some of these students simply lacked the aptitude to be pilots, and would soon be wearing the embroidered dragon wings of the Fleet, cruising between the stars, bored out of their minds. Of those who passed through, two-thirds would receive silver honeybee wings and go into combat support positions, flying transports and tankers. The remaining third would win the silver hornet wings and fly to battle in attack craft or fighters. A tiny percentage would combine their talent, skill, artistry and courage and become aces. That's what Egan was looking for. Sifting through the jokers, trying to find an ace.

He made his assessments with surprising speed, a quick scan of the most current flight evaluations sufficing. This one was a wash. Him too. That one showed some promise. Faith, get this guy out of the sky before he kills someone.

He stopped with one file and studied it carefully. Her basic flight evaluations were excellent, but now she was having trouble with aerobatics and combat maneuvering, like many others. It was the kind of trouble she was having that stopped him. She would fly easy, then stiffen up abruptly. The evaluator was Lt. Martin. Martin got an edge in his voice when things got dicey. If she was sensitive enough to pick that up and react to it, however inappropriately.... He opened the personal data in the file and gave a low whistle when he saw the photo. She was a real beauty. That wouldn't help. Half the class must have made a pass at her by now. Not good for the concentration.

Egan's leg locked up on him again, and he hobbled stiffly back into Shea's office.

"I'll take this one," Egan said.

• • •

Ingrid felt a sharp pang of fear when she saw a light colonel climb from the crew bus in front of her aircraft. She snapped to attention as he approached, giving a sharp salute. Right hand at shoulder height close to the body (to show "no aggression"), palm out (to show "no weapons"), fingers relaxed (to show "no claws"). If she had been an Indian, you would expect her to say "How."

He returned her salute with the easy wave he gave everyone and said, "Relax. I'm not here to wash you out. I'm Colonel Vincent, and I'm your new instructor."

It surprised her that he had immediately known her fear. The scare stories parents told their children about the Volan made a fast pass through her memory. Could he read her mind?

"It doesn't take a mind reader," he said, relishing her shocked expression. "It's what any student would think when a senior instructor walks up to her ship. How's your fuel?"

"Nine thousand, sir," she said.

"Let's have it topped off. Fuel at the field is of no use to you."

He flagged down a maintenance truck and ordered the tanks filled. Then he sat down on the pavement in the shade of the truck, motioning Ingrid to do the same.

He slipped off his gold-frosted sunglasses, exhibiting the squint that had become a permanent part of his expression, sunlight or no. When he turned to Ingrid, her head snapped aside. She'd been caught staring at him.

"How many Volans have you been close to?" he asked.

"Touching close?" she said. "None, sir."

Egan smiled. "Are you embarrassed because you stare at my eyes the way the guys stare at your chest?"

That got her! Ingrid blushed so hotly Egan could see the glow through her fur. He tossed his head back in a brief, hearty laugh.

"Lytle," he said, "don't be embarrassed by the truth. Only by not admitting the truth. Pilots are always ribbing each other, regardless of rank. It grows out of the competitiveness you have to have to be good. Only the best survive." He sat up to face her squarely. "And before you ask, they're not dark all the way around. See?" He pulled down a lower eyelid to reveal a sliver of white sclera. "Here. Get it out of your system. Look."

She did, a bit reluctantly. The iris was so dark that it required close study in strong light to discern the pupil.

"It's not all black," she said. "Hard to see the edge." She examined both eyes carefully, shifting her head to catch different angles of light. "I've heard the scare stories about the Volan. Going mad and biting people's necks and that junk. I was always curious about the eyes, though. How can you stand the sunlight?"

"Just barely," he said, slipping his sunglasses back in place.

Ingrid sat back and regarded him with a painfully innocent

expression.

"Shall I show you my chest now?" she said.

Egan goggled. Ingrid grinned. Then they both laughed.

"Got me!" Egan said. "Good shot." They settled back against the truck again.

"I am in trouble, aren't I, sir?" Ingrid said.

"You're having trouble," Egan corrected. "Your flight evaluations show you're not getting the elements of combat maneuvering." He decided to try a gambit. "Think you'd be happy as a support pilot?"

"No!" she snapped. She held back whatever else she was going to say, audibly grinding her teeth. Then, resignedly, "It'd be better than nothing, sir."

"No it wouldn't," Egan said. "You're not the sort to be satisfied with second place. Let's see what we can do about that."

Egan hauled himself up and caught the eye of the line chief, then made a circular motion with his hand, the ground signal to "start engines" or "hurry up." The chief glanced up and down the line, on the lookout for the maintenance officer, then the fuel truck's engine rumbled in a new, throbbing key. He had shifted to high-speed pumps, which were usually used only for fast turnaround fighters. Egan's reputation, however, earned him special treatment.

"OK," he said, "let's see what you know."

They walked to the trainer and Egan immediately climbed the pogo ladder to the rear cockpit, leaving Ingrid standing alongside the nose, puzzled.

"No walk-around, sir?" she called.

"You pre-flighted, didn't you?" he responded, buckling his safety harness.

"Yes, sir," she said. "But..."

"You're taking the front seat," he said. "If anything goes wrong, you'll hit first."

It was a large vote of confidence for a student pilot. Ingrid appreciated it even as she realized the deadly truth of it.

• • •

For the next three days Egan put Ingrid through her paces. He kept the maneuvers easy, never demanding, rarely criticizing. Ingrid knew he was sizing her up, testing her at the basics. She felt like an overwound spring and did her best to hide it.

The unwinding place was the base officer's club. The students held temporary warrants, and were thereby authorized to enter. But tradition and custom dictated that they not mix socially with the greatly outnumbered instructors. So architecture provided for custom in the form of a small area of tables separated from the rest of the club by a hip-high brass railing and enclosing its own small bar: Stevens' Ramp.

While it maintained the mandated separation, the instructors and command staff could still oversee their charges. And if, as often happened, members of the two groups desired a discussion, the veranda that overlooked the airfield was officially "outside" the club.

In truth and in practice, the separation had proven more necessary to protect the impressionable students from the antics of their superiors. It was said, only half in jest, that more pilots had wrecked on Stevens' Ramp than on all the battlefields in history.

Egan put the Ramp's vantage point to good use. He spotted Ingrid across the main club room and watched her briefly. She was tentative with the other students and didn't mix well, although a number of her classmates spoke to her. Check that. They weren't just talking to her, they were hitting on her. Several guys and a couple of the gals approached her with intentions that were clear even at a distance. Ingrid fended off each one with gentle courtesy. Well, Egan had known that might be a problem. He was glad to see her handling it so well.

A pair of instructors nearby also surveyed the students. Instructors were not supposed to mess about with students, but there was no regulation forbidding it as long as it wasn't a student you were training or evaluating, and some instructors were predators in more than combat. Egan suddenly stopped ignoring their comments when a certain word hit his ear.

"...Blonde rat with the blue eyes. The grand Norge wench with the fine... radomes!"

Egan slowly turned on his barstool and pushed his drink to the far edge of the bar, out of the way.

"Yes, indeed. I ought to invite her out on the veranda for some 'discussion.'"

"No one fucks around with my student, Schimaneck," Egan said coldly.

"Oh," he responded with mock concern. "Did you want her...?"

Egan stepped much too close to Schimaneck's face, his eyes narrowed, whiskers laid back, and his grin showing a discomfiting amount of his five-inch incisors. Though he was half a head shorter, Egan seemed to tower over his opponent.

"No-one fucks around with my student," he said again. "Is there any part of that you don't understand?"

The miscreant shook his head. "Then have a drink," Egan concluded, handing over a glass that the bartender had filled as the confrontation started. The deflated officer accepted and retired to the far end of the bar.

Egan turned back to the main room and saw Ingrid immediately. She had moved within a few yards of the rail and stood poised and tense, a look of concern just fading from her face. Egan realized that she had noticed the quiet face-off from clear across the room. Her body language told

him that, had it come to blows, she would have been over the rail, swinging, before the second punch landed. Perceptive, gutsy, loyal to her own. And did that glance she tossed back carry just a hint of reproof?

He scooped up his cognac with a wry smile. "Damn me in a barrel," he said to himself. "I've been adopted."

• • •

The trainer leveled off at 20,000 feet. Ingrid's eyes made a quick sweep of the instruments, and she awaited instructions. What did he have in mind today? His voice crackled in her helmet phones.

"You do all right with the basic maneuvers," Egan said. "But you're not putting them together smoothly. A lot of that is just practice." *And a lot isn't*, he thought. He leaned to his right, pressing his helmet against the canopy. From there, he could see her hand on the side-mounted stick. As he thought, she gripped it far too tightly.

"Come to one-three-five, climb to 25,000," he snapped, putting an edge in his voice. She cooked the climbing turn and had to put the wings level sharply to keep from overshooting the course. She put the nose down abruptly as she came to altitude and her speed surged. Most students would have required correction. Egan could tell that Ingrid knew it was wrong, but couldn't tell why.

"Lytle," he said gently, "your ship knows how to fly. It wants to fly. But you have to *let* it fly."

There was a slight, almost imperceptible quiver in the aircraft. She had re-gripped the stick even tighter than before. What would loosen her up?

"Let's play. I'm going to be your backseater," he said, referring to the systems officer normally found in strike aircraft. "I'm going to give you warnings, directions and maneuvers as if we were being pursued by a fighter. You respond appropriately. Got it?"

"Got it, sir," she said.

"Fighter, five o'clock high, closing fast!" Egan said sharply. He hadn't crossed the T in "fast" before Ingrid pivoted left, slammed in the afterburners and kicked the thrust vector to grab altitude.

"Still on us! He's got speed! Split S!" Egan shouted, giving every impression of a man near panic. Would she join the panic, or decide that only one of them was allowed to panic at a time?

Another shout, a high-G turn that plastered their wings against the sky. Fast descent, loop, another turn, half-eight. Ingrid felt sweat soaking her back, but she couldn't quit. *Wouldn't* quit.

"Get your speed back!" he yelled, "he's comin' around again!"

"Who's flying that thing?" Ingrid hissed. "Me!" Egan said. "You're up against the best! Break left!"

She not only turned, she threw a snap roll in that lost altitude and built speed. *That should throw 'em off*, she thought.

"Second fighter, seven o'clock!"

Ingrid almost turned right, an amateur's move, and instead added power and spiraled upward, away from the danger. Was Vincent trying to get her in a no-win situation? she thought. *No!*

"I can still win," she said, not realizing she had spoken aloud. "Whatever they throw at me, I can still win!"

She jammed the ship into a hammerhead stall and reversed direction. In a real fight, it was a kill-or-be-killed maneuver. Egan didn't let her off that easy.

"They're still back there — gonna bracket us! Go down, down, *down!*"

Ingrid power-dived, pulling the nose up way too close to the ground, doing 500 knots. Then she edged lower. And lower still. She spanked the rudder, fishtailing to keep the enemy guessing. She cut in close to the sparse trees. Egan found himself looking *up* to see their tops.

"That threw 'em," Egan yelled. "Put 'er on the roof!"

She rocked the stick back and firewalled the throttles. She broke the sound barrier going straight up. She ripped through the clouds to the bright sunlit blue. Seven miles above their starting point, she gently tipped over into level flight. A moment later the trailing shock wave gave the craft a little shake, a soft pat on the ass.

"That is what I've been talking about!" Egan said, elated. "That's what I mean by flying."

Ingrid was still catching her breath, her mouth suddenly dry. "Were those maneuvers OK? I was too busy to tell."

"Exactly my point," he said. "I didn't just throw the book at you, I swatted you in the muzzle with it. You didn't have time to *think* about it, and you did great. Those weren't separate maneuvers. That was one single, continuous movement. Fabulous!"

He leaned over to see her hand on the stick. She clutched the stick in a fist that must have turned her knuckles white. *Damn!*

Egan took a deep breath. Enough for today. And yet...

"How's our fuel?"

"13,000 pounds, sir."

"OK, we'll extend this day a bit. Head north, zero-three-zero degrees."

Ingrid made the turn and set cruise speed as the suns brushed the horizon. In less than a half hour they approached a weather front pushed up by a mountain range four miles below.

"This is fine," Egan said. "Just loiter here."

Ingrid settled in a gentle left turn normally used to hold

position over ground troops. The colonel was silent and she grew apprehensive. The canopy support arching above her held three rear-view mirrors, although only the left and right ones were commonly used — the belief being that if an opponent got in your center mirror long enough to see, you'd be shot from the sky anyway. The idea was to use the mirrors to see where trouble was coming from. Ingrid now tilted the center mirror to spy the rear cockpit. If any trouble was coming her way, it would come from there.

Egan was staring out of the cockpit with an expression of awe. Ingrid followed his gaze.

The sunset had transformed the sky. The clouds above and around them glowed with gold near the horizon, crimson and violet surrounded them. The edges of the clouds burned like iron from the forge. The tones and shadows changed subtly by the minute.

"I like to come up here at sunset," Egan said at last. "It's not enough to be able to fly, Lytle. You have to love to fly. Those are not your ship's wings. They are *your* wings. Your ship doesn't fly, you fly. It's as simple as that."

Ingrid had never seen a sunset so beautiful, flying inside of it. As she curved around, she saw her contrail sweeping through clouds, taking on their color. She wasn't just in the sunset, she was part of it. A part of the sky itself.

Egan leaned back to his right and caught sight of Ingrid's hand. She held the stick with a gentle, graceful grip, her control movements smooth and precise. For the first time, she flew without thought.

Egan smiled slightly. *Success, he thought.*

"Let's head for home," he said.

A landing in the twilight can be difficult even for an experienced pilot. Ingrid's landing was so smooth the transition from wings to wheels was barely perceptible.

• • •

The new day was as crisp and clear as the previous one had been humid. Egan had ordered Ingrid to meet him early for the day's practice in formation flying. She arrived at her assigned aircraft aboard a crew bus just as Egan alighted from a maintenance truck.

"Morning, Lytle," he said, returning her salute with the usual easy wave. "I thought we might go over your ship in some detail this morning. It pays to know as much about your craft as you possibly can. There's a crew from Aero Repair working on the rudder ratio shifter. Let's give 'em a hand."

When Egan said "give 'em a hand," he meant it. In twenty minutes her hands were greasy, her knuckles skinned, and her ship was safe to fly. She also knew more about her ship's flight controls than any other student in the wing. Egan led her around the aircraft with a screwdriver in hand, popping open quick-release panels and displaying the muscle under the craft's metal feathers.

Ingrid pulled her head out of a hole packed with inscrutable electronics. Egan snapped the cover locks in place.

"You really like getting inside an aircraft," Ingrid said. "You like the maintenance troops, too." It was an observation, not a question.

"Of course," he answered. Then he recited:

"Now, pilots are highly trained people,
And winning your wings is no trifle,
But without the work of the maintenance crew,
The pilot would march with a rifle....'

"There's more to that, but that's the important part," he said. "These people take a bunch of parts and flammable liquid and make it into something that will fly. It's magic."

They ended up squeezed together in a crawl hatch under the tail, giving the casual observer the impression that this craft had abruptly sprouted four legs.

"There's a shear pin for the elevons, too," Egan said, indicating a device deep in the aircraft with the flashlight. "If your stabilizers are damaged, it breaks and you can keep control with the undamaged side."

"I can't quite see it," Ingrid said.

"Ahhh. I need the pump pliers to hold this wire bundle back," Egan said. Ingrid glanced down at the tool box at their feet, out of easy reach.

"Maybe I can catch it and pull it..." Egan stopped. The pliers appeared in his peripheral vision. Ingrid had caught the tool with her nimble prehensile tail and passed it up.

"That tail has to be an unfair advantage," Egan said admiringly. Ingrid flashed a smug smile that admitted the fact. "Doesn't it grow hair?"

"I shave," she replied. "I have that much vanity."

Egan reached for the pliers without looking. His hand caught her tail mid-way and slid to the tip to take the tool.

Something's wrong, Egan thought.

Ingrid had taken a deep breath that she had yet to release. Her eyes were unfocused and her mouth was hanging open. Her breath came out in a soft squeak and her eyes locked on his. They were suddenly aware of how much their bodies were in contact. The crawl space was immediately too warm, too dark, too close.

Egan concentrated to keep his voice even, almost succeeded. "Go ahead and slide out. Wait!" How would that look, with her kneeling below his waist? "I'll slide out...no." Past that bosom? "Together!"

They eased out smoothly, separated, then cracked up laughing at their own embarrassment. The specialist waiting to button up the craft was sure there was nothing humorous about an elevon drive pack and concluded that pilots were just too weird.

Egan and Ingrid walked to a spot off the left wing, away from

the sharpest ears.

"I'm sorry," Egan chuckled. "I didn't know your tail was...sensitive like that."

"Neither did I!" she said, still surprised. A blush appeared in her nose and ears. "I'm not, well, experienced."

"Hey," Egan said gently. He pointed at her. "Student," he said, then poked his thumb at himself. "Instructor. And nobody fucks with my student. And when we're alone, or on the intercom, the name's Egan. Is Ingrid OK with you?"

She nodded, and they walked slowly back toward the ship.

"I would like to see you mix better socially with your classmates, though," he said.

"I've tried," she said with a touch of frustration. "At home, the family always knows where you've been, what you're doing. There isn't much call for conversation. The seniors at the club always talk about the day's flying. They're in advanced combat training, and we're still trying to keep our wings level. I don't know what to say."

"Don't worry. You will," Egan said. "Let's go fly."

• • •

Formation flying would one day be second nature to these pilots. At this point it was a nerve-wracking exercise in near-mid-air collisions. They flew in formation, changed formation, broke up and re-formed, broke up and tried to *find* the formation. Ingrid displayed the steadiness to be a good formation leader, but in the pack she lagged, slipped, overran, bobbed and got lost. Just like everyone else.

With sixteen aircraft in the training range, they switched between sections frequently, learning to work together. Even in this structured environment, Ingrid remembered Egan's lessons and stayed aware of her surroundings. Then something caught her eye.

"Ship in trouble, three o'clock low!" she said urgently.

"Team Frank," said Egan over the air, "break and hold at 29,000. Ingrid, spiral down. Keep them in sight."

She rolled left and angled down. The other trainer was in a flat spin, falling like a manhole cover. The trainer should have righted itself almost at once, pointing nose down on its own. Yet the spin rate was increasing. Either the flight controls had failed or the student was fighting it.

"Simon Four," Egan called to the craft, "Brenda, take control!"

"Can't..." came the reply, suddenly cut off.

The plunging ship seemed to shake, then something gave way inside the left wing. Ingrid could see the wing flex and the skin buckle.

"Get out of there!" Egan shouted. "Bail out! Bail out!"

The crippled ship began to tumble wildly. The rear canopy blasted away, followed by the ejection seat.

"One away," Egan said aloud. "Good 'chute."

He called again to the doomed craft. "Simon Four. Gaus, release your controls, grab the 'D' handles and *pull the trigger!*"

Ingrid watched the craft's shadow appear on the ground. Watched the shadow and the ship hurtle together with horrible speed. Watched the two merge and dissolve in a bloom of flame and dense, black smoke.

"Did you see a second parachute?" Egan asked.

"No, sir," Ingrid answered, surprised her voice worked.

"Head back for base," he said. "I'll have Rescue pick up the survivor."

The crew chief hooked the pogo ladders under their canopies and Egan climbed down, his foot hitting the concrete like his weight had doubled. The ground crew kept their distance instead of swarming the ship as they usually did. They had noted the missing ship and already guessed the worst. Ingrid pulled her helmet off but didn't move from the cockpit. Egan climbed the forward ladder to eye level with her.

She sat staring into space, not looking at him even as she spoke. "I never saw anyone I knew die before. I never saw anyone die before." She turned to him, her deep blue eyes asking him, pleading to know. *Why?*

Egan reached for the words, and found none.

• • •

The "O" club was understandably subdued that evening. The instructors had lost too many friends over the years to be hard hit by the death of a student, but they maintained a respectful quiet for the benefit of the students who were suffering their first such loss. The wing commander appeared briefly, found the mood to be somber but not morbid, said a few words and departed. He judged, correctly, that things would be back to normal by tomorrow. The pace of training allowed little time for mourning.

Egan lounged against a post on the "O" club veranda, holding a drink. He stared into the darkness, not seeming to see the lights of the base below, lost in thought. Ingrid was unsure about approaching, but she had a serious mission to carry out.

"Colonel?" she said softly, "the older bartender in Stevens' Ramp sent me with this. He said you'd need a refill by now." She immediately felt she'd been played for a fool. Egan's drink was not half empty.

Egan chuckled. "That'd be Mike. It's his way of getting someone to talk when he thinks they need to talk." He accepted the glass and set it on the railing.

"What does he want me to say?" she asked.

"Not you. Me," he replied. "Mike knows more about the people in this outfit than the wing commander. That's why chaplains and 'O' club bartenders have the highest security clearances. If he sent you to me, there's something I need to say."

"Ingrid, aerial flight is not safe. It will never be safe. You can do everything right and still end up a black smudge on the ground."

"We may never know what happened to Ken Gaus. I saw Brenda, Major Spieller, at the hospital. She doesn't know herself what went wrong. Only that Gaus wouldn't eject. She's convinced he was trying to keep the ship flying so she could get out. She's putting him in for a Praetorian Medal that will have to be carved on his headstone."

Egan turned to her and spoke earnestly. "When your ship fails you, you must get out instantly. You are the single most important component. The truly irreplaceable part. If you have a crew aboard, they could be incapacitated or dead, and you wouldn't know. You must save yourself."

"I see," Ingrid said glumly, clearly unhappy with the conditions. "We're all on our own and it's 'Devil take the hindmost' in the air?"

"No," Egan said. "You have all of us. The fliers in your unit. The rest of the Air Service. Every pilot that ever flew rides with you. We learn what they learned. Their victories, their mistakes. Even how and why they died. And they count on us in the same way. To build on what they learned and to pass it on to the next pack of sprogs. If we can learn why Ken Gaus died, no one will ever have to die that way again. And his life will not have been lost for nothing."

"I think that's what had me scared," she said. "That you might die and have it mean nothing."

"In the service of our people, we stand," Egan said, quoting the military's Loyal Toast. "And fly. Always remember, every time we fly, it means a lot."

"Colonel...Egan," she said shyly, "could I ask you something?"

Gulp, he thought. But he nonchalantly said, "Sure. You can ask me anything. What?"

"You're one of the best pilots in the service. Why are you here, teaching me?"

"I'm teaching you," he answered, "because you have the aggressiveness, the basic skills, the instincts to be a good fighter pilot. You just need to know where to direct your talent."

He shifted his weight, his leg giving him trouble again. Clearly, he wasn't eager to open up. But he had told her to ask him anything. She deserved accurate answers.

"As to why I'm here at all," he went on, "it wasn't that long ago that I left a chunk of myself in someone's airspace."

"You're not crippled," she chided. "You wouldn't let it stop you if you were."

He had to smile at that. It was true.

"Perhaps you were closer to the truth," he said thoughtfully. "When I got out of the hospital, it seemed that more than my leg was missing. Something inside was gone, too. Maybe I

was too aware of the dangers of flying, and not considering the joy of it. Maybe I just didn't want to go down and have it all count for nothing." He fixed her with a clear, piercing gaze. "Maybe I just wanted a legacy."

Suddenly, she felt very proud and very uncertain, as if she were being handed a precious gift that her hands were too small to hold.

• • •

Through the next week, Egan drove Ingrid hard, borrowing other students and instructors as both pursuers and targets. And he hammered the lessons home.

Her salvo missed. "Get in close," Egan said. "And when you think you're too close, get closer. Stick your nose in his cockpit." She turned to attack again.

She climbed too high, with too little power. Egan said frantically, "Carry speed! Speed is life!" She used the thrust vectors to put the nose down hard, gained speed, and lived.

She'd been half-nodding when she looked through a book written when aircraft were made of sticks and strings. Then sleepiness left her and she groped for her marker pen. "Secure an advantage; the sun at your back, altitude, surprise, then carry through the attack no matter what."

She lost sight of her opponent. "Don't just look," Egan said. "See! Search for the bastard!" She spotted him just before he made an attack of his own.

She rolled over and reversed on her opponent. "Eggs, bacon and pancakes," she muttered.

"What's that?" Egan asked.

"You said 'study your enemy 'till you know what he had for breakfast.' That's what Dennis had."

Egan laughed.

• • •

The Master Cylinder. The Great Washing Machine in the Sky. The Air Combat and Interceptor Training Area had a number of nicknames. But most students called it The Drum.

A vast portion of airspace, it was a cylinder fifty miles across and reaching from 50,000 feet down to an artificial "ground" that was 5,000 feet above the tundra. Trainers were equipped with infrared laser "guns" and studded with sensors. On-board computers allowed for lead, drop and flight time of shells and recorded hits. Hits caused the trainer's formation lights to flash brightly, and enough damage caused the victim's fire control screen to flash red and a violet smoke marker to stream from the exhaust. There were no simulated missiles, energy weapons, or exotic technologies. This was gunfighter school.

The Drum stood just south of the main base, and had emergency landing fields nearby, forming a triangle with the main base and providing a greater margin of safety to any craft that got in trouble. The Drum was regarded as a combat area, and any ship entering was considered a fair target.

I am not ready for this, Ingrid thought as she approached the invisible wall of The Drum. Egan had insisted that no one was ever ready for the first time, and ordered her in.

"I'll act as backseater and help spot for you," Egan said. "Just stay sharp."

The sights and fire control screen flashed from white to green. Weapons enabled, sensors on, and every hit, shot and movement tracked and recorded by the control system at the base.

Ingrid flew in at 30,000 feet and made a sharp turn. She scanned the sky with sharp, short turns of her head. She searched. Hard.

"Fighters! Five o'clock low! Two of 'em!" Egan shouted. They had got in under her. Ingrid reversed the turn before they could bracket her and poured on power. One of the attackers chanced a shot, and Ingrid felt the stick and seat thump from the artificial impact warning.

"Close!" Egan said, his own adrenalin flowing. "They're falling behind. I looks like they're..." He stopped. He had just looked forward and saw the center canopy mirror — the mirror full of blue eyes, watching him. More afraid of him than the enemy. *Damn!*

"Get out of the Drum!" Egan shouted. "Right now! Put down at the east field! Down!"

Ingrid put the stick over and lost altitude rapidly. She guessed that his patience with her had run out, and that she had just made her last flight. She dropped toward the emergency field, almost dive-bombing the end of the runway, then flaring out to touch down neatly.

"Get the spoilers deployed! Stop on the runway!" Stopping on the runway was against regulations, but Ingrid dared not protest. Egan seemed absolutely livid. He popped the canopy release before they even stopped rolling. He had unplugged the intercom line to his helmet as he climbed over the edge of the cockpit, so, while she could see him speak, she couldn't hear his words. The words were these: "Nobody fucks with my student. And that includes *me!*"

Egan did a chin-up on the edge of the forward cockpit, his tail flapping in the suction from the jet intake, and got close enough for Ingrid to hear. "You don't need me for *those* two," he bellowed over the engine noise. "Get those bums!"

He dropped off and ran to the edge of the runway. Ingrid was astounded. Did he mean it? Really mean it?

Egan turned to face her at the runway apron. Somewhat impatiently, he jabbed his finger at the sky. At The Drum.

He meant it!

She pulled the canopy switch and called the tower. "East tower, Lucille Two, clear for take-off from the runway."

"Lucille Two, you're clear to go." The controller had watched the entire event through binoculars. His partner was on the all-squadrons alert phone to the main base. Vincent had

loosed his huntress. Whatever happened next would be worth seeing.

Ingrid twitched the thrust vectors at the end of the runway and blasted into the air. She gained altitude and raced for the top of the Drum. She punched through the wall at 48,000 and took up the search.

At last! On her own at last! And yet...

"...A fighter with advantage will come out of the sun."

"Keep altitude until you're ready to attack."

Instructor's axioms. Books about combat. Egan's voice. They almost seemed to come to her from her earphones.

Where were those bums?

She spotted them, two miles below, cruising. They weren't expecting her to be back.

"Altitude gives you the initiative," the voices whispered. She turned to put the sun over her shoulder and kept to the wingman's side of the pair. Only one pair of eyes, there. Then she put the nose down and dived on them.

She planned to attack the wingman first. But her surprise was so complete that she shifted her sights to the leader.

The lead ship's lights strobed as she scored hits. He and his wingman wasted two seconds trying to spot her, then split up fast. Ingrid pursued the leader. She had speed. She had altitude. She had *him*. She got in close. Then closer. She filled the sights with his ship and hammered him. His impact lights strobed and purple smoke blew from his tailpipe.

One down! Where was the other one?

"Burglars hide under the bed," said the voices.

She looked down. There he was, trying to get under and behind her. That's what he'd done when she first entered the Drum. Not again, bub.

Ingrid wheeled down on him. He went on the defensive at once, going into a "rolling scissors" maneuver. He corkscrewed up and down, trying to get her to lose speed to stay behind him or overshoot him to fly in front of his guns. Ingrid wasn't having either. She finessed her control and conserved energy while still staying behind him.

Finally, he threw his craft down in a death spiral. Ingrid paused before pursuing, causing her opponent to lose sight of her under his wing. She had the speed advantage and spiraled outside his turn. Each time he thought he might slip out, she was there to intimidate him with a short burst from her guns and force him further down. She couldn't get him in line for a shot, but she kept forcing him down, matching him turn for turn, letting him wiggle but not slip away. And always down. And down.

He hit the electronic "ground" at 5,000 feet and his exhaust erupted with violet smoke. Ingrid shrieked in delight and raked the stick back. She blew through 12,000 feet seconds later, pulled a hammerhead stall, crunched the thrust vectors

down and somersaulted her craft. Far below, Egan marveled at her audacity. It was something he hadn't taught her. It was pure, triumphant joy. The feel of victory writ large in the sky.

Egan stood by as Ingrid's ship was marshaled in by the ground crew. Once refueled, they would fly back to base. Her classmates would be waiting to offer deserved congratulations. She had just met two senior students with months more combat practice and beaten them. Not just won the fight, but beaten them. At the "O" club that night, Egan knew, she would tell the tale, the first of many times. She would be the center of attention and her hands would gracefully weave the three-dimensional story where spoken language faltered. But for a few more minutes, she belonged to him alone. And there was yet a duty to perform.

She was up in her seat as soon as the chocks were in, and nearly stepped on the crew chief's fingers in her rush to get down the ladder. She still beamed, nay, glowed, as she jogged to him. She drew up before him at attention.

"Colonel?" she said gaily.

"Flight Cadet Lytle," Egan responded.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough," she said.

"Just remember to pass on what you've learned someday. That's thanks enough."

"I will. I promise!" she said.

He took a step forward and picked up the bucket that sat between them. Snapping it with the precise movements of a rifle drill, he raised it over her head and upended it. Ingrid squealed as the water drenched her. The victory tradition fulfilled, Egan tossed the bucket vigorously over his shoulder and then did the unthinkable. He snapped rigidly to attention and saluted her, a perfect parade-ground salute. The astounded Ingrid could do no more than return it as best as her soggy flight suit would allow.

In that moment, she realized that she would never match Egan's record, his achievements. Never would she be his equal. He was the absolute best. But from that instant they were both pilots. And that was more than enough.

In the months to come there would be more intense training. Simulated emergencies, scrambles, orbital and free-space maneuvering, arrested landings and catapult takeoffs. To Ingrid, it would all be a piece of cake.

• • •

witness the commissioning and for a parent or mate to pin on the hard-won wings. The parade ground was therefore packed with the relatives and friends of the students after the official ceremonies. But in the midst of them, Ingrid was alone. She had rejected home and family by having the temerity to enlist without family approval. Now the family turned their backs on her and her achievement. It didn't surprise her, but she was surprised at how much it hurt. Ingrid intended to pick up her wings after things cleared out, but it was not meant to be.

Egan strode toward her, resplendent in full dress blue. Seven ranks of decorations marched up his uniform to threaten the red and silver rose blossoms of his rank on his shoulders. In his hand glinted a bit of shining metal. Hornet wings.

He boldly slid his hand inside her coat as the pin pierced the fabric. "I thought you might need help with these," he said as he locked the pin in place. "No one deserves these more than you."

Ingrid was back at her quarters packing her bags before she noticed that the wings she wore were not gold, but pure silver. Egan had pocketed the issue wings and given her his own.

• • •

"I went to thank him," Ingrid said, "but he was already gone. He checked himself back into a combat unit. Whatever he felt he'd lost, he found it again."

Chrystal nodded. "Where is he now?"

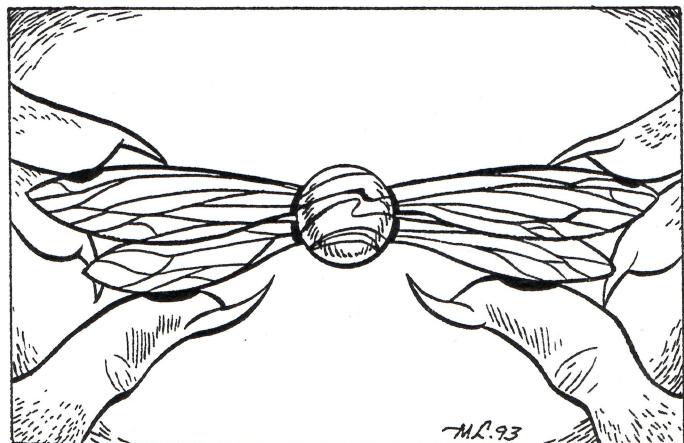
"He was hit by ground fire over the Palidor. He made it back to base, but his landing gear collapsed on touchdown, and his ship cartwheeled."

She pinned the wings on her uniform. Silver hornet wings worn down from being pinned on thousands more clean uniforms. Shining still like the first day she wore them.

"That's why you keep putting in for flight instructor duty," Chrys said. "To keep the promise."

Ingrid nodded and pulled on her jacket, tugging it tight at the hem.

"And it's why I said that I never really soloed. When I fly, I'm never alone." ☺



"Goldwings" was the nickname given to newly commissioned pilots. The Air Service did not splurge on issue insignia, and the wings that a new pilot received on graduation were no more than a thin coating of nickel on brass, coated with an amber preservative. The new lieutenants would be expected to buff off the amber to reveal the white metal beneath. But most polished too hard and scrubbed down to the brass. Then they'd give up and buy decent nickel plate or silver wings.

It was tradition at graduation for the new pilot's family to

Ah...excuse me? Ma'am? I was wondering
if you could help me find someone?

Morrigan's
War



EMPIRES

ART / STORY / CONCEPT: CHRIS GRANT INKING: JORDAN GREYWOLF LETTERING: DAVE BRYANT (CHAPTER #24 of "EMPIRES - Ace of Spades")

His name is Janos Alpen.
He's the sergeant that works
for Captain Morrigan.



Store was quiet 'cause it's Freeday,
so the manager let me and a couple of others
go early. I was wondering if you could join me.

Well...let me ask.

Ma'am? Would it be
possible f'r me t' take
th' rest of today off?
All th' reports are
finished.

Hot date, Sergeant?

I don't see any problem with that.
In fact, I may see you out and about tonight.

Ahh...yes'm.

Ma'am?

Hm. It seems that Captain Savitch has asked me to accompany him this evening.

I suppose I should clean up a bit....



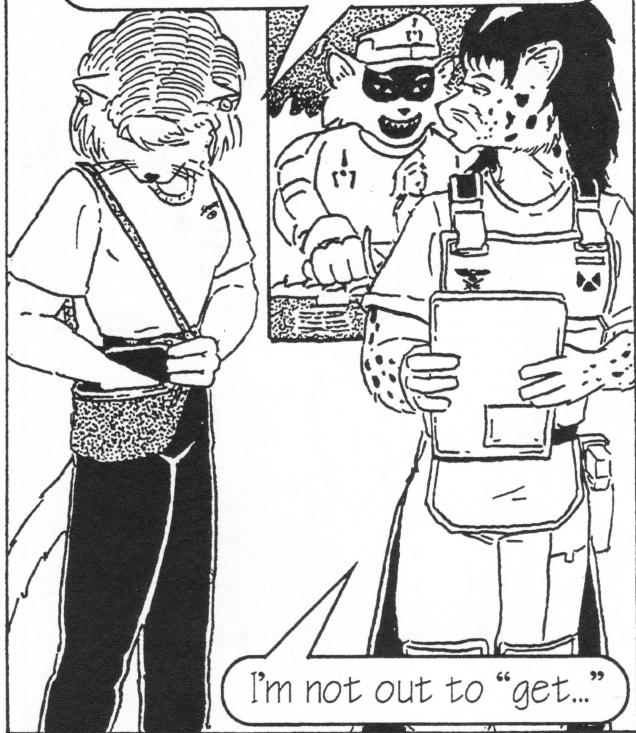
Y'got someone to do your hair?



Oh, your hair could look really nice.

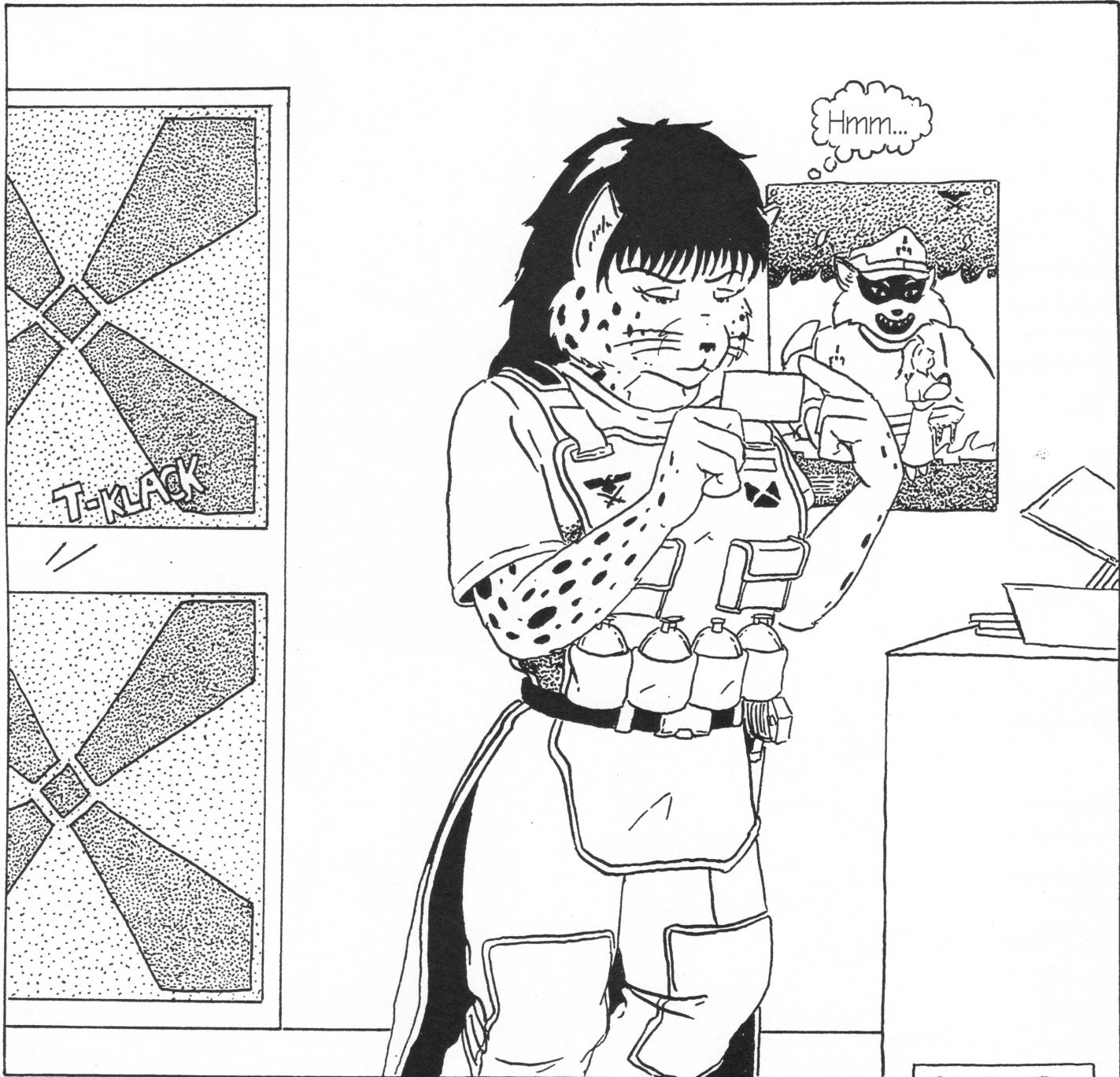


If you don't take care of your hair, it'll look just shitty -- oh, pardon my D'Nykresci -- and you won't get a guy with hair like that.



Here. This is the guy that does my hair. He's fabulous. He's at the shoplex a couple of blocks down.

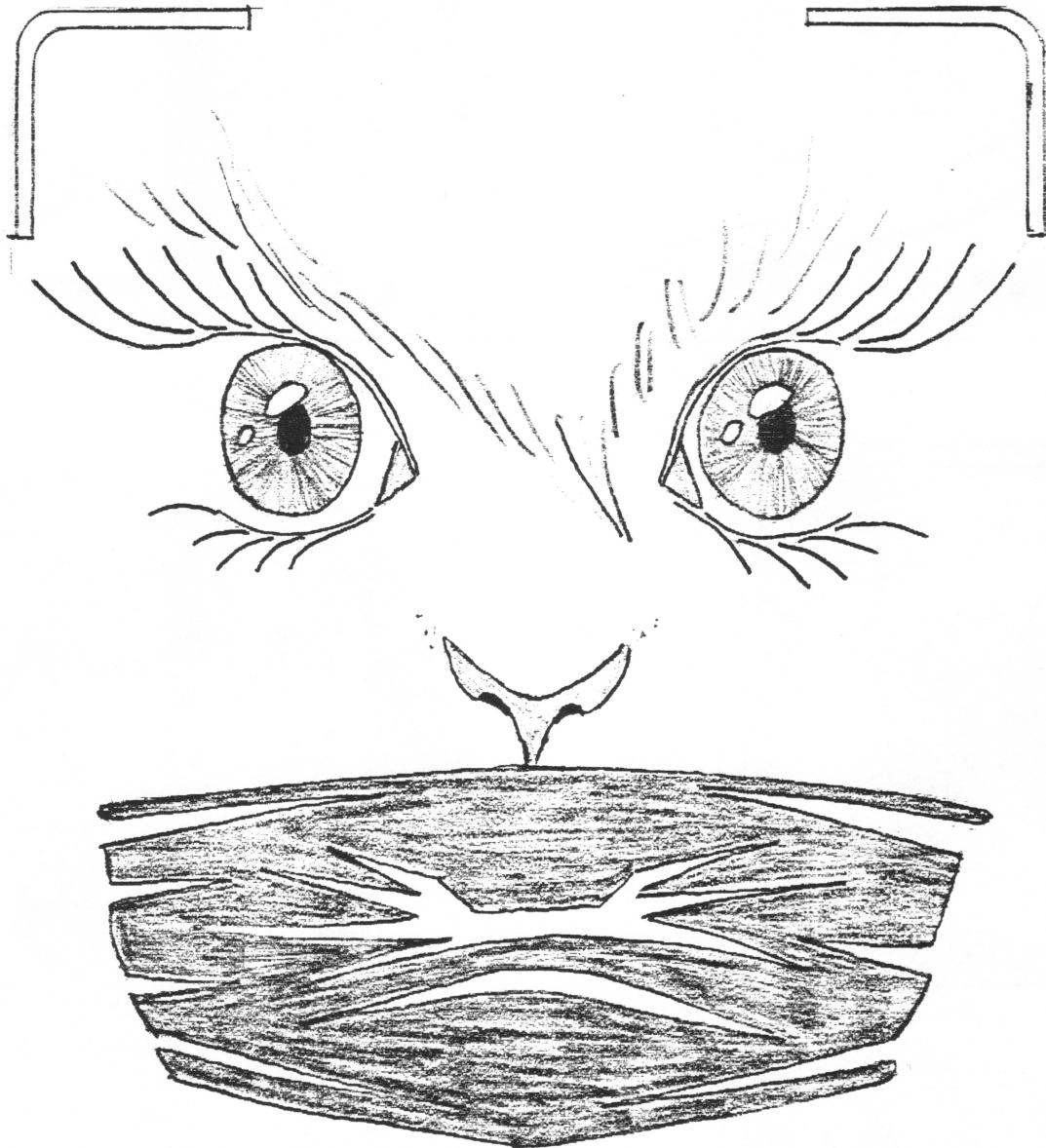




QUNFIT TO BE QILED

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY KEN QICK

BECAUSE CELLULOID HEROES NEVER FEEL ANY PAIN.
— THE QINKS, "CELLULOID HEROES"



1/40
06:23 - 5

46PZ 29mm 1P
1P67P 352 6/m 12

WEBFED QUNIVERSE AND ITS INHABITANTS CREATED BY KURT MILLER

"Zhakasitkhai?"

"Ika ari. Kheshtulai."

"Zhain thalenai? Yip! Indrai! Khasikh!"

Red, grey, and silverblack foxes and vixens raced around in barely controlled chaos — cameratechs swapping battery packs, grips arranging lighting and equipment, prop foxes and script vixens, fur groomers and wardrobe working over furry actors for the next scene of *Castle Elkauden*.

Amid the vulpine chaos, a single lepine fidgeted — a topheavy white rabbit-girl in a ripped bodice-vest and pointed apron overskirt over a smudged and soiled *smessara*. Nosepad quivering and ears aback, the one bunny amid all the foxes fussed with the long white tube of an empty cigarette holder and stared wide-eyed at the setpiece that was becoming the center of attention — an inside corner of fake stonework, the dirt-covered floor before it strewn with the random debris of an old castle storeroom. Or dungeon...

For much of her sixteen years, Brigit had lived for moments like this — on the set before the grav-cams as a *real* actress, instead of on a bed before the grav-cams of her former owners. Even a tearjerker period serial like *Castle Elkauden* was better than the "Slutbunny" videoporn she'd been built for, back when she'd been only a piece of meat. Runaway spooge-slave, three years on the Outside — two aboard a privateer in the Greyzone learning to be Brigit, then a year on Evergreen in WebFed breaking into *real* showbiz — and now this. For the first time in her career, she wanted out — back to the Greyzone, to the *Weregild*, back to Melissa and Kriss and Mara and Malki and T'kree and the others....

Benga aftertaste sweet-and-sour in her mouth, she pressed the white memory-plastic into a collapsed rod and stroked it out into its full thirty-centimeter length. During the day's shoots, she'd been trying to cut the tension with bengasticks, actually *smoking* them instead of just letting them burn in the holder after a single puff to light up — at least until she'd gotten so uptight the smoke became nauseating instead of soothing. Anything other than the scene coming up —

"Seshai Brizhittai?" Charcoal-tipped rabbit ears whipped around at the sound of her name in Davvashi, followed by the rest of Brigit.

"You're on next, little white one," said Brigit's "native guide" — the script vixen assigned to her.

"Already?" Brigit looked over at the pair of portable tailchairs used for last-minute actor prep. The right-hand one stood empty, with a grooming-and-wardrobe vixen looking at her and motioning for her to come over. Her ears dropped down and back, locking in the "cornered by predator" position.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." The snow-furred bunny looked up at the umber-furred vixen — like everybody else on the set, taller than her. "Just a little tight, that's all."

"Then come along. You don't want to hold up this scene, do you?"

"No." *The show must go on.* The two walked over to the empty chair; Brigit slipped the collapsed cigarette holder into her benga case, handed it to the script vixen. "Could you hold this for me — for when I wrap the scene?"

"Of course."

The rabbit-girl's last role — the first for Tazral — was for a season of benga commercials, a season spent slinking before the cameras, vamping and smoking the product on cue. For that role she'd worn Verrai originals, baroque Art Deco in liquid chrome; for this scene she'd be wearing ropes and a gag. Her character was a ten-day guest part, an exotic vamp from "a far land" who came to the baron's court and gotten mixed up in the romance and intrigue that was causing her current exit — abducted by the regular heavy's henchfoxes.

It was a "damsel in distress" scene — "Vixen victim" in Davvashi. She'd sit against the corner in the background, tied and gagged, watching helplessly as her captors decided her fate. The ranking henchfox would leave, and the other would draw his blade to dispose of the bound bunny. That would be her cue to slip the gag and deliver her lines, begging and bargaining for her life; the scene would cut before the audience knew whether she'd succeeded or felt the blade, providing a cliffhanger for the next set of episodes.

"Now, if you'll have a seat?"

Brigit sat bolt upright in the fabric-and-frame tailchair while the two vixens went to work — the wardrobe-and-fur vixen adjusting her torn bodice and degrooming her fur to proper disarray for a kidnap victim and the script vixen going over her lines and cues from the other end of a long tunnel.

She'd been a little apprehensive since she found she'd be tied up; her ex-owners had used B&D as punishment, with cameras recording for resale as *Slutbunny Bondage* or some such title. But yesterday's dress rehearsals had gone surprisingly well; she'd been reassured by the obvious phoniness of the prop bonds and gag.

Clutching the arms of the chair, she concentrated on her lines, throwing them back to the script vixen without a miss, amazed she could still remember the entire dialogue. Then it ended, and she looked around for another distraction.

She found one — a hyperactive grey fox in white with purple ascot, beret, and glasses, halfway across the set in animated conference with some camera techs. *And of all the directors to have at a time like this — Ludi nim-Tazral, the studio chief himself!*

"Done," came the vixen's voice from behind her. "Could you stand up?"

Brigit did; the wardrobe-and-fur vixen gave her a once-over, checking the soiled and torn hem of her *smessara*, giving the

bodice a final adjustment. The bunny looked over at the set and the propfox, ready to fit her into her bonds. *Time to go....*

"Could someone — escort me over?" she started in a cub's voice. "Please?" The last thing she wanted to be now was alone.

"Sure, white one." Taking a deep breath, Brigit started over to the set and the waiting propfox, thankful for the script vixen walking beside her.

• • •

With the other males on the set, Ludi watched the rabbit-girl being escorted to her cue marks, charcoal cottontail announcing her buttocks, enormous breasts threatening to burst out of her bodice with every step — Even with those human-wide hips and shoulders, she could still turn every male head in line of sight.

A natural, thought Ludi. He'd been moonlighting as *Elkauden's* second unit director for the past few days, a welcome break from the paperwork and deal-slinging of a studio baron. Let Fyessa handle the business end of showbiz; Ludi was in this for the show — back in a director's chair, actually *making* the shows and scoping out this new actress with the exaggerated figure and long ears. *Like something out of a wish-fulfillment backstage musical*. So far, just like the "Make an Impression" commercial directors had described her — wonderfully exotic looks and voice, talented and competent if a bit inexperienced, taking direction well and delivering a good performance, with no sign of the ego problems all to common in this business. *Good talent, easy to work, and coming out of nowhere. Actually from the Greyzone; not much difference....*

But today, she had burrs in her fur — fidgeting like a Selkie, smoking between scenes, generally looking a bit too wrecked for the upcoming shoot. *Possibly just getting into the role too deeply — or maybe she's just having a bad day. I'll talk to her about that after we wrap the scene.*

• • •

The propfox held a prefab figure-8 lashing in ruddy-furred hands — a set of handcuffs made of rope, loose enough to slip on or off. Brigit's stomach shrank as he walked around behind her, started to pull her hands behind her back —

And Brigit whipped around. "No!" she blurted out, then in a more normal voice, "I'll — put them on myself." Recovering, she raised her bright blue eyes to the propfox, dropped into her character's voice. "However, if you'd be so kind as to hold them for little me..." He did; she turned around and, taking a deep breath, pushed her hands through the lashing until the cords fit just above her wrists. *There! Survived step one. How's this?*

"Ari." The propfox checked the phony bonds, then knelt and pushed the bunny's feet together.

Brigit swayed a little, stomach churning as the propfox looped another fake lashing around her lower legs, above the torn and soiled hem of the *smessara*. Her eyes traced a pattern in the cracks of the set wall, up to where the fake stone ended

and the stage equipment began — the rest of the wall would be computer-animated in after shooting.

Velcro crackled just above her ankles. "All right," said the propfox as he straightened up. "Now try your legs." She shifted her feet as far as they'd go without tearing the fastener, looked past her bustline at a dark band of ripped scarf over the *smessara's* long patterned skirt. Then the propfox dug in his equipment box, came up with a folded midnight-blue bandscarf — the gag.

Brigit shut her eyes as he brought it up to her face. The gag was a joke — tied over her mouth instead of through it to let her slip it on cue, covering everything between nosepad and chin to look more impressive. She'd worn it at yesterday's dress rehearsal — a little anxiety, but nothing she couldn't handle. She'd even joked about it, doing a ditzy motormouth *schtick*, continuing in mime and *Mmmmmf!*, and later reducing most of the cast and crew to helpless yipping with a high-pressure sales pitch for "GagCo! The leaders in low-tech countersound!"

Then came last night — a nightmare that jolted her awake and gasping. All the punishment sessions collapsed into one — no sight, very little sound, just touch sensations and emotions —

"You've been a bad girl, Slutbunny. Class Two for you." A real *poireé* gag filling her mouth, tasting of stale rubber and plastic resin as it forced her jaws open and choked her....

"You know what happens to you when you're bad." Class Two — Bunny in Bondage. The aching of unsupported breasts and strained jaw muscles, arms and legs elaborately strapped in black leather bondage harnesses....

"You'll learn to do what you're told!" Pain shooting down the backs of her thighs where she'd been jackknifed over a trapeze bar and paddled just short of the point that the bruises would show through her butt fur, the gooey stench of her own filth as she voided herself, while cameras rolled for *Slutbunny's Spanking* or a similar title....

"Goodbye, Slut!" as the door shut and left her in total darkness... Darkness and the terror that her owners would never come back to release her. *No! No! Please! I'll be good!* Then the leather gear and gag tightened and kept tightening, crushing her wrists and chest, choking her, dislocating her jaw, suffocating her — *NoNoNoNoNo!*

Then she was awake, clawing off her sleep mask, exploding out of the bedcovers and through the bedcurtains — into the main room of the bachelorette *hasha* she shared with Vina. She'd spent the rest of what should have been sleep sitting on the edge of her bed, kneading the velveteen toy rabbit Melissa had given her in white-furred hands, staring at her roomie's curtained-off bed alcove across the cluttered living area....

"Finished," came the propfox's voice from behind her, and her eyes snapped open. Cloth pressed against her mouth and cheeks, crackling against static-charged fur. "How is the fit?"

"*Mmmmmf!*" She nodded yes, human-style. Two grips —

husky for Thalendri, about average build for a human—took hold of her upper arms.

She slipped the gag, almost falling over as she twisted out of their grip. "No! Let go of me!" Ten Thalendri ears flicked at the outburst. *Oops!* Head bowed and ears back, the short rabbit-girl stood amid the knot of foxes, feeling even more alone as they stared at her. *Think fast, rabbit!*

"I'm sorry—really," she started quietly. "I just don't like to be so—helpless." *Definition of helpless: A small white rabbit, trussed up and surrounded by four very large foxes....* The bunny took a deep breath, then raised her bright blue eyes to the grip standing to her right. "However," she started in her character's voice, "I'd be honored if you two would help me sit down."

The propfox retightened the leg-tie, refitted the gag; she caught a fold of the scarf in her front teeth, both to keep it from slipping prematurely and to give a good wrinkle effect. The grips presented their arms like gentlefox escorts and gently took hold of her while the other three left.

Brigit's stomach collapsed into a neutron star as the grips lowered her into position, sitting on the dirt floor, propped up by the corner of the prop wall. *Don't leave me....* She watched the grips leave, replaced by two vulpine actors—the heavy's henchfoxes—taking their marks as grav-cameras floated into position. The set lights flashed on, cutting her sight of anything except vague silhouettes; the background noise lowered to a barely-audible hiss as the countersound came on. *Time to go....*

CLACK! She jumped at the sound of the clapperboard—a schtick Tazral Studios used instead of the usual sync-pulse. A few seconds to recover, then Ludi's voice cut through the countersound.

"Action!"

The two foxes loomed over Brigit, purplish silhouettes against the set lights, talking over her fate as from a parsec's distance. *This isn't for real. I'm an actress on a set.* The set's faux stone dug into her shoulders as she sat there, grasping her charcoal cottontail while she waited for her cue. *No! I'm Brigit now—not Slutbunny.* Another, phantom rope began to tighten across her chest. *This isn't for real!*

Pounding heart echoing through her neck and ears, she tried to follow the dialogue, looking frantically at one fox, then the other, while they talked her doom. *No!* She felt the cords on her wrists get tighter, tried to pull them loose—*they're only props!* *Why won't they come loose?* She started to struggle, biting her lower lip—and pinning the gag—concentrating on the wrist loops. *Damn you, come off!*

with their long-eared captive against the wall in the background, white half-face above dark blue gag between and behind them, eyes wide and nosepad flaring. Brigit was squirming too much, her struggles threatening to upstage the other two. Probably padding her part—a little out of character for her. *She's overacting....* But her struggle was heightening the tension—let her go. *But she looks even more helpless that way—a lot of viewers will be wet-eyed over her.*

• • •

I can't breathe! The phantom rope was crushing the rabbit-girl's heaving chest, the gag—pinned in her teeth—was suffocating, and the wrist-loops were getting tighter and tighter—just like in the nightmare. *No! This isn't for real—I'm awake now!*

Then came her first cue—"And her?"

"Dispose of her. I'm leaving now, for Court. I want her gone when I return." He turned and left the set, followed by a gag-muffled wail.

The remaining fox turned towards the bound bunny, drawing a prop blade—twenty-five centimeters of Bowie-shaped metal, gleaming in the set lights. "Say goodbye, White One."

No! Please! I'll be good! He took a step towards her—the cue for Brigit to slip her gag and lever herself up the wall to deliver her first line. Only she wasn't Brigit any more; she was Slutbunny again, and her owners were about to punish her.

NOOOOOOOOO!

• • •

"Camera Four, close in on him; Camera One, keep tight on her; Camera Two—go!" Ludi's hand swept over the smartpad, reconfiguring the camera-feed windows for the second half of the scene. Then a cloth-muffled howl cut through the countersound—*Brizhittai! Slip your gag now! Now!* On Camera Two, the henchfox took a step toward the squirming captive.

Brizhittai! Now! Ludi yipped over the countersound—they could always remove his voice in post-production—"Now! Now!" *What's wrong with her?*

Velcro parted like ripping canvas; the actor-henchfox jumped back as the leg-tie whipped free, then the rabbit-girl blew the take—spectacularly, writhing and kicking in some sort of seizure. *Too much to be an act—is she epileptic?*

"**Cut!**" The bound bunny continued screaming—muffled screams that withered Thalendri ears as the gag finally came loose. *Definitely no act!* Ludi keyed his intercom to the grips. "Get her out of there!"

Two stagefoxes—the same two who had set her down—pulled the sunfishing figure up from the corner, jerked the prop bonds from her wrists; the screams stopped, replaced by broken sobbing, then gasping, then coughing.

• • •

Brigit held onto the two stagefoxes, clutching them in a

"Camera Three, hold position, track in when Zhedann exits. Camera Two, stand by for establishing two-figure shot. Camera One, ready for close-up of *Brizhittai*." Ludi's voice overrode the others in his intercom headset as he checked the camera feeds on his smartpad. Camera Three was up on the main window—the two heavies talking in the foreground

death-grip as she finished coughing. *Too much smoke...* Then she was standing on her own, dizzy from gasping as she just realized what she'd done — blown a take on a major scene, in front of the chief of the entire studio. *Blown the scene — no, my entire career, right down the toilet!* She let go of the two stagefoxes, suddenly ashamed.

A studio paramedic checked her over as the gasping and shaking faded; around her, a flash-crowd of cast and crew hovered in little knots, sneaking looks and talking about her — *"What's with Ears?"* Then the one grey fox she didn't want to see came up to her, hands on hips. *Think fast, rabbit!*

"Well?" Ludi asked. "What happened?"

"I just... panicked, that's all." She wiped the damp fur below her eyes. "The bonds were tight, and I couldn't breathe. I'm all right now — just panicked, that's all." She remembered how Thalendri defuse awkward lapses — *When in doubt, flirt* — steadied her voice, and looked up at the head fox with long-lashed blue eyes. "I shan't disappoint you, *Mir nim-Tazral.*"

"You didn't — just surprised me." His eyes looked down a long grey muzzle from behind purple Varitints; he put a hand on her shoulder. "Just don't be so tight — your character's the one in jeopardy, not you. Understand?"

"I understand." She batted her eyes at him. "I think I'm ready now."

"Sure you don't want a little more time? Within reason, of course." He tapped the purple-enamelled benga case in his breast pocket with one black fingernail. "Possibly something to help calm you?"

"No, thank you." She shook her head, human-style. "I've too much benga in me already." *So far, no deep trouble — just tough my way through this, and everything'll be all right.* "Now, if you'll excuse me, we have a scene to shoot." With this, she turned and walked over to the canvas tailchair where her propfox and groomer waited.

• • •

Ludi watched them start to work on her, then turned to the propfox and paramedic. The propfox said the wrist-bonds had been loose, demonstrated on his own wrists; she'd apparently twisted or wedged her hands in the lashing instead of just pulling them through — no easy task. The paramedic said she'd had an anxiety attack, not an epileptic seizure. *Just panic at being tied up — enough that she forgot how to slip the props... strange she didn't give any sign of this at the rehearsal.* Then the cameratechs and script and continuity vixens for a quick conference on reshooting the scene — keep the first half from the first take, start the second take right at "Goodbye, White One," and 'morph the transition in post-production.

When he'd finished with the cameratechs, he caught sight of Brigit again, standing there tied up, looking uncomfortably like a tabloid melodrama of someone about to be executed — all that was missing was a trapdoor under her feet and a

hangfoxes' noose over her head. On impulse, Ludi crossed over to the short white-furred figure. "Are you *sure* you're ready, *Brizhittai?*"

"Mmmmmf!" she answered, then held her head high and winked one blue eye; her ears were still locked down and behind, her nosepad quivering.

Ludi faded back to his position as the cameras floated up and the grips lowered the rabbit-girl into position. *Amend that image — a Selkie facing the gallows, she's trying to maintain so hard.* He keyed up his intercom, detailed the two stagefoxes to pull her out and loose her *quick* if she started another panic attack. Ready in the set, actors on marks, cameras in position, lights up, continuity check, adjust positions, countersound on, sound check, camera check, clapperboard.... "Action!"

This time it was worse.

"CUT!" Once Ludi had seen a Quellan go *grand mal*, all twelve tentacles flailing; he'd never again witnessed the like until now. Throwing his smartpad aside, he ran to join the crowd forming around the writhing white rabbit. Part of him — the male Thalendri — was rushing in to help an attractive female in trouble while another part — the director — gauged the possibility of ditching a difficult actress and continuing without her.

He reached the action just as the grips got her loose; she lunged forward, grabbing for the nearest male. Thalendri reflexes kept Ludi braced and on his feet as the rabbit impacted, crushing herself against the front of Ludi's shirt and crying into his ascot. She cried like a human, with racking sobs instead of the choking warble of a Thalendri.

Recovering, Ludi tried to figure his next move — *The first time, just a blown take. But this? She's in no shape to continue — not for a while.* He keyed his intercom on. "Take a break, everybody. And stop staring."

Grav-cameras grounded, their operators taking the opportunity to swap battery packs. The cast and crew drifted off into small gossip-circles, taking furtive peeks at the grey fox wearing a clinging white rabbit. Brigit's shaking lessened; her sobbing tapered off into gasping punctuated by occasional coughs. Ludi stared over her head at the set wall behind her, his mind racing through his options.

Get rid of her, and find another actress, one who can do the scene? Not unless he wanted to reshoot ten days' episodes already on chit. *Can't do a straight substitution, even with redress; she's far too exotic — how many Thalendri-sized rabbits are there?* Or he could try a "virtual Brigit", a computer-animation simulacrum — still too expensive for *Castle Elkauden's* budget. *No way out...* He gave a disgusted, gekkering growl —

Brigit jerked at the sound, reminding Ludi of the dead weight hanging on his shirt front. He looked down at the bunny clinging to him — head hunched between trembling shoulders, cheek fur matted with tears, chin crunching fallen gag, ears glued back against her head, bangs falling over wide terrified eyes. *Like a scared cub. Makes no sense at all...* He'd seen temperamental actresses, ego problems — too

many of them in this business — but Brigit had shown no sign of either before this. *No sense whatsoever....*

He grabbed her wrists, detached her grip. "God and Goddess, *Brizhittai!* Just what is wrong with you?"

She yelled back, flipping into disjointed WebTalk — "I was built as some asshole's property! *What do you think my owners used to do to me? Why do you think I ran away?*" Then she started babbling, staring at the benga case in his breast pocket. "I thought I could handle it — it's just pretend, it's not for real — I thought I could handle it I thought I could handle it I thought I could handle it —"

"*Brizhittai!*" He grabbed her by the shoulders, then cupped her chin, pulling her head back up, looking into that round white face with the wide blue eyes and quivering nosepad. She fell quiet except for frantic breathing that reeked of taste-blend and just stood there, looking very small and very young — younger than the 24 she'd always given as her age. *Now what?*

She'd been staring at his benga case a moment before; did she want one? *A taste of smoke would help calm her down....* With his free hand, he pulled out the purple case, showed it to her. No response. He flipped it open, held it under her nosepad so she could smell the contents.

The bunny started at the sight and smell of bengasticks, pushed the case away. "No — can't," she got out between gasps, drifting back into Davvashi. "Can't smoke — when like this — too tight — just throw up —" She shuddered again, then looked back up at Ludi, whimpered, "Please — hold me?"

He put his arms around her shoulders, held her tight as he would a cub. Her breasts crushed against the base of his rib cage; he felt his codpiece tighten as his body responded. *God and Goddess, not now!*

A quick look around, then his headset linked to the stage's PA system. His amplified voice thundered, "I said *quit staring!*"

The knots of vulpine spectators quickly looked away; Ludi's mind kept running through options, trying to figure out some way to salvage the scene. *Rewrite it so she's not tied up? Not the way she's built, with humaan-style muscles; afraid for her life and pumped on adrenalin, she could overpower her captor — or at least put up a fight the storyline can't afford. If she's not bound — or overpowered in some other way — she's not going to look helpless enough. She'd kill the scene....*

Tranq her out? He looked down, at the platinum-blond mane and long quivering ears below his muzzle. *In her condition? She'd need to be tranqed so that she'd barely be able to act — both eyes in the same socket. And this is a long speaking scene, with more cues and lines than a baron's daughter has suitors....*

Shoot around her, using extreme close-ups? I've already got the establishing scene — no, too obvious. Audience would know I'm hiding something. Shuuth's Choice...

The rabbit's shaking faded as she nestled in the fox's embrace. Being held meant she wasn't alone and scared, that someone was there, pressing up against her so that she could feel his breathing and heartbeat. More soothing than the finest smoke, even better than being groomed, just to be held by *someone*, especially a male —

A male who had the power of life and death over her future.

Think fast, rabbit!

She stiffened, let go of his shirt front. "Mir nim-Tazral," she began, smoothing the tear-stained fur below her eyes as he released her. "I — think I've recovered — I'm all right now."

"You said that last time."

Her heart joined her stomach. *He's going to fire me! On the spot!* "Ludi," she looked him in the face, "I'm an actress." *A real one. Not a furpiece. Not a pitchcritter.* "And I have a scene to finish." *Not going back. Not now.*

"And have this happen again?" His ears flicked back. "Any worse and you'll be in a hospital."

"The show must go on' — isn't that what you said?" *Three days ago, when the power hiccuped in the middle of the big baronial ball and we had to reshoot the entire scene — Remember?* She looked up, into the slit-pupilled eyes behind the Varitints.

The vulpine face stayed frozen for a moment, then his eyes brightened behind the glasses and his ears flicked forward. "We might have a way.... Have you ever used a microprompter?"

"A what?"

"Sort of a receive-only intercom. Fits right here," he touched the side of her head, where her right ear disappeared beneath platinum hair. "Inside your ear; so small nothing shows on the outside. I'll be on the other end of the audio link and coach you through the scene."

She looked over her shoulder at the set, ears and stomach quivering.

"Wowowow?"

She looked back at him, charcoal-tipped ears unlocking from their cornered position. "Let's go."

• • •

He walked her through the scene — every line of it — in one last unbound rehearsal, the microprompter nestling in her ear canal like the earplugs she'd worn the time she'd fired Thompson's Wristbreaker and almost cold-cocked herself from the recoil. Audio and camera check, then once more the prop bonds and gag, the sitting down, the lights, the cameras, the looming silhouettes, the clapperboard, the pounding heart and building panic....

"Action!"

The blade flashed in the set lights. "Say goodbye, White One."

NONONONONONONONONO!

"Brizhittai!" Ludi's voice buzzed from inside her plugged ear. "Your cue! Slip the gag and start up the wall — now!"

She thrashed her head, pushed with her tongue; the midnight-blue bandscarf fell away to form a loose cloth necklace. Above her, the henchfox-silhouette grew, haloed in the backlights. "No," the bunny gasped, chest heaving, stomach imploding. "Please —"

"BRIZHITTAI!" the microprompter buzzed again. "Your lines — Wait! One moment — all I ask is one moment' — and up the wall! Now!"

"Wait!" she repeated — was that *really* her voice? — then started to wedge herself up the wall, pushing with legs of quivering rubber, trying to rise to her feet. "Please!" Her mouth and throat seemed to be working by themselves in a terrified whimper. "One moment —"

On the other end of the link, Ludi watched her rise. *Just get her through this scene... decide later whether to keep or fire her, just get through this.*

"— All I ask is one moment!" Brigit's heart pounded in her throat and ears; all she could see was set lights bouncing brilliantly off the blade. *Don't hurt me don't hurt me don't hurt me....* She opened her mouth; for a moment nothing came out. *NO! Something — got to say something! Anything!* "Even the hangfox lets the condemned say some last words!"

Ludi checked his smartpad, the script scrolling to the left of the camera-feed windows. *That's not in the script!*

"PLEASE!" Her voice was cracking, overtones shattering into a barely-controlled scream. The gleaming blade started to blur as a fog formed from nowhere, where Slutbunny once more cringed under the riding crops of her owners —

"Brizhittai! Follow the script! Your character's the one in danger, not you!" Again the buzz of Ludi's voice in her ear, breaking the spell. "Pause a moment — hold your breath — now, Just one..."

"Just one moment —" She grabbed hold of Ludi's voice as though it were warm fur and kept going, raising her eyes from the shining blade to the wielder's face and letting her eyes melt — *when in doubt, flirt!* "Just one, noble sir..."

Ludi sighed with relief at her recovery, then his ears flicked at the husky tone in her voice. *Just what is she doing?* Another prod through the microprompter — "Cut on the seduction — this is a melodrama, not some slickskin 'erotica' piece!"

The rabbit-girl's ears twitched, Ludi's words pulling her out from her ex-owners' straps and cuffs to the set and the scene; the fog was coming back, except now it was red. *Not slickskin erotica, not slickskin porn, not a slickskin's Slutbunny, I'm not Slutbunny, never again Slutbunny!*

Ludi watched her launch into the main part of the scene, a nonstop monologue of heart-ripping pleading as the captive rabbit talked for her life. She wasn't following the script completely — maybe about eighty-ninety percent — but

what was erupting from her fit so perfectly.... "All cameras! Whatever you do — whatever she does — don't stop!"

Brigit was on her feet, leaning against the set wall, gripping its fake stone, hammering heart mainlining adrenalin to her brain, all of her senses heightened to Thalendri-pitch. When the lines fled from her memory, the voice through the microprompter reminded her; when the adrenalin fog was about to sweep her away, the voice would pull her back.

Ludi kept an eye on the scrolling side window. Halfway now! He said into a pause in the dialogue, "Keep going, cub! We're halfway through! The rest is downhill! 'Spare me and —'"

She clutched to Ludi's voice as she had clutched to his shirt front, part of her watching herself skipping over lines, filling blank gaps in the dialogue with ad-libs like she was actually talking for her life, a preyed-upon rabbit kicking back at the predator with words, now reasoning, now vamping, bending the henchfox to her will — "Just let me go. Under cover of the night. I'll simply disappear — no one in Elkauden will ever see or hear of me again. As far as your master is concerned, I'll be just as dead, and you won't have to dispose of a body or wash off any blood."

The script scrolled down the smartpad, beside Camera One's feed slowly tracking into a closeup of the bunny's face. *Two-thirds through.* The rabbit-girl's ears were rising now, as she parried and thrust her half of the dialogue. The professional director in Ludi watched, almost carried away by the intensity she projected; the male Thalendri sensed something else rising up from under the white fur, inside the cub inside the vamp — a core of Triple-S metal channeling the erupting volcano — *no, binding the supernova* — the sum whole becoming someone who might be worth knowing more than professionally. "Come on, cub; come on, cub; come on, cub..." he chanted through the intercom in a near-whisper.

Ludi's mantra echoed through the microprompter like soundtrack music, anchoring Brigit into the present, to the scene that went on forever. Ears now fully erect and a lock of hair in her eyes, Brigit was running free despite her bound hands and feet, pouring more of herself than she thought existed into a scene that had become her whole self, Slutbunny finally scoring one back against her owner and tormentors —

"CUT!"

Brigit heard her voice run on for a second or two, then stop, leaving only the rush of benga-flavored breath and the thump of her heart in her chest. Slowly, she sagged against the wall, releasing her grip on the faux stone, a piece breaking off in one hand. Another furry hand — the actor-henchfox — reached for her, brushed her bangs out of her eyes; then the propfox pulled off the wrist and leg-ties and she was the center of a flash-crowd yipping in Davvashi.

Still another hand — the script vixen's — appeared, pressing the enameled purple of her benga case and gold of her lighter into her hands. "You said you wanted to celebrate when you wrapped the scene."

Ducking and running, the rabbit-girl beelined off by herself,

still wearing the fallen gag around her neck. She found an uninhabited corner of the soundstage, got a stick of Silverfox into the extended holder, the holder into her mouth, and was fumbling with the lighter when her name blasted over the microprompter. "BRIZHITTAI!"

She jumped like she'd been goosed, ears reaching for the ceiling, snatching the bengastick from her mouth as she whipped around to face an approaching Ludi. At the sight of him she deflated to just a small white bunny, embarrassed at all the trouble she's caused. *What did I do wrong? Do I have to go through that again? Is he going to fire me? Think fast, rabbit!*

"M-mir nim-Tazral, I—" Ears dropping back to the cornered position, she started to stammer out an apology.

Ludi cut her short with a grey finger to her mouth, then put both hands on her shoulders. "You were magnificent, little white one!"

"B-but I missed some of my lines — they just went blank — and I had to add some of my own to fill the blanks!"

"Brizhittai." He touched her nosepad with his. "When you fill in your own lines and they're worse than the script, that's a bloop. When they're better, they're improv. Yours were improv."

He paused for a moment; the rabbit-girl tried to read the cat-eyes behind his Varitints. "Brizhittai, Castle Elkauden is melodrama, and melodrama is intensity — exaggeration playing on viewers' emotions. What you did — that genuine intense panic, that dance on the edge of Shuuth's Embrace — brought out so much intensity you couldn't help but supercharge the scene."

He paused again; for the first time since she'd met him, he seemed hesitant, a little like Malki when he wasn't playing macho. "Brizhittai, this is your last scene for today — go home and recover. No, you're not fired. Just —" The grey fox hesitated again, "— I have to direct for the rest of the day's shoot." No... he couldn't be... "After I wrap, what if I — called on you and treated you to dinner. No, I'm not trying to seduce you."

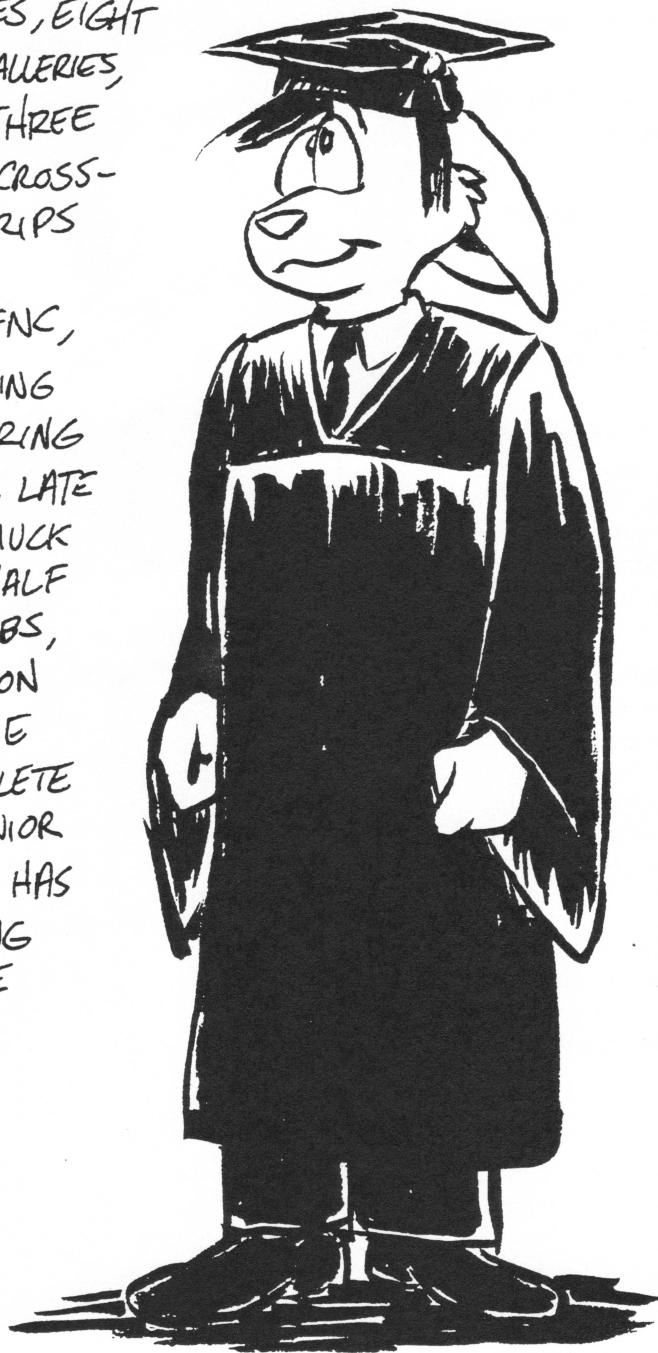
He was! Brigit thought about the offer, running her tongue over her front teeth; then her ears started to perk up. Sweeping her cigarette holder up in the gesture she'd used for the Silverfox commercials, the bunny batted long-lashed eyes and whispered, "I would be honored."

• • •

Ludi nim-Tazral, the Tazral of Tazral Studios, made a surprise appearance at Yovann's with an even more surprising companion — Brizhittai Bunnai, the long-eared exotic with the Terry-toon chest who "made an impression" — quite an impression — in those cigarette ads and is said to be guesting soon in Castle Elkauden. Our covert camerafoxes caught Mir nim-Tazral and his newest nimsalai over omelettes, wines, and bengasticks at the dining club, where anybody who is anybody simply must put in an appearance; now all Glitterden is abuzz with the question: Just what is going on between these two? ☺



AFTER FIVE YEARS OF COLLEGE AND ANOTHER THREE "ON SABBATICAL," THIRTEEN CONVENTIONS, TEN ROWRBRAZZLES, EIGHT YARF'S, SEVEN GALLERIES, FOUR HUZZAHS, THREE SAMPLERS, TWO CROSS-COUNTRY ROAD TRIPS AND COPIES OF STATION! AND FNC, COUNTLESS INKING JOKES, STAGGERING CREDIT DEBTS, LATE NIGHT FURRY MUCK SESSIONS, A HALF DOZEN ODD JOBS, NOT TO MENTION SNEAKING TIME IN TO COMPLETE A COURSE IN SENIOR DESIGN WHICH HAS BEEN PLAGUING MY EXISTENCE



FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS TO FINALLY STRUT ACROSS THE STAGE IN THIS STOOPID HAT AND SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEAN WHO I'VE NEVER MET, THE PROVOST WHO I SEE NEARLY EVERY DAY IN MY DAY JOB, AND THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT, TO GET A VERY LARGE DIPLOMA WITH TOTALLY IRRATIONAL DIMENSIONS, MERELY TO RETURN TO MY WORD PROCESSING JOB A FEW DAYS LATER AS IF NOTHING HAPPENED EXCEPT THAT I FEEL INSPIRED ENOUGH TO FINISH OFF MY EIGHTH SKETCH BOOK WITH A BLATANT BRYCE NAKAGAWA RIPOFF.

JIMMY GHIN
5-6-93
SEE ALSO YARF #5 pg 14

RALPH THE WUNDER HAMSTER

HEAD CABALIST
JIM ALVES

CO-CONSPIRATOR
Roy D. Pounds II

A BIRD IN THE HAND
MEANS MESSY FINGERS!
WE'D FINALLY TRACKED DOWN THE
WAYWARD UNITS —

IN: SONIC TOADS

PART FIVE

© JAMES W. ALVES 1992
...UN DAH HYDRA VECULATOR, AHN
DAH MEDDLE FAZE LOOP LOCK, AN
DAH SLOATPFELLERSFITZENFRATZEN

BUT MEANWHILE...

CHUST
GREAT







IT WAS?! WELL, FINDERS KEEPER!
STELLA - KEEP TABS ON 'EM!

LET'SEE - TRASHED MAP...

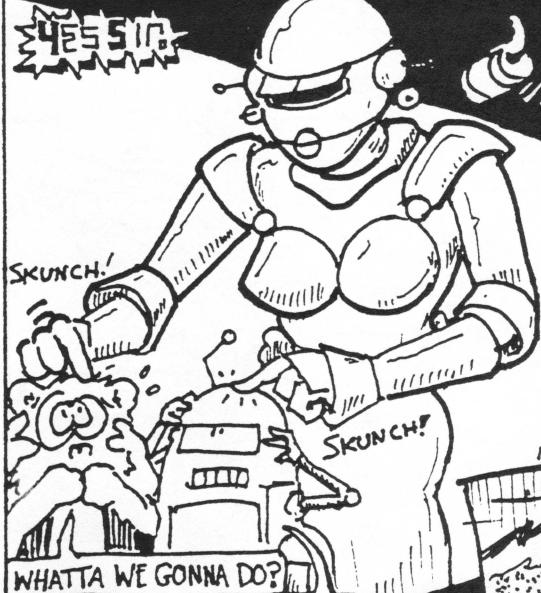
BANANA PEELS...

MOTOR OIL...

WOOLBURY'S PAYROLL...

ACCUMULAT- WOAH!

YAHOO!



SIR! INCOMING CRAFT!
S.G. CLASS!

HEY! GREAT! MY OL' BUDDY JACK!
SEND 'EM IN! WHAT A SURPRISE!

A ZILLION MILES FROM MY
CUBBY HOLE AND RUBBER DUCK.

WOOLBURY'S
PATROL

ZO-HE LIKE ZE
SURPRISE, EH?

BEE BEEP! BEE BEEP!

SIR!
RADAR
LOCK-
DUCK!

HE-HE-HE-
HE-HA-HA!

LOCK

RUN FOR
IT RALPH!

HOR!

EEUHH-WHAT'S A MATTER
WITH JACK NOW?

SNAP!
CRACKLED POP!

DIT!
DIT!

HANG ON TO YOUR HATS, GANG!



IN OUR IMAGE

CHAPTER FOUR

BY WATT MARTIN

As far as Kevin could tell, neither Tara nor Rob moved a muscle while he was in the kitchen. He set Rob's drink on the end table, then pulled an ottoman up near the couch. "She doesn't bite," he told Rob. Then he turned to Tara. "He doesn't bite, either."

Tara turned to look at him with eyes as wide as baseballs.

"Basically, I want Rob here because I figure he can tell me what we need to do next," he told her.

She bit her lip, looking worried.

"God, that's cute," Rob said. "Maybe you should tell me what's already happened?"

"Okay. It's pretty simple. I was walking out by some development last night, Amber Lake, Amber Woods, something like that. It had started to rain, hard, and there was this big wall along one side of the place and an empty field along the other, and the wall had spikes set in it to keep people from climbing over.

"So I was walking along the sidewalk by the wall and found bloodstains down it. I figured somebody must have tried to climb over the wall and gotten a spike through their leg, and probably didn't get very far. I went poking through the forest and I found her."

"And that's why she's beat up," Rob said.

"Yeah." Kevin pointed to the bandage on her foot. "A spike went right through there, in one side, out the other."

"So why are *you* beat up?"

"Oh, she was scared, didn't know I was trying to help — I think she was scared by something worse than just spikes. I don't know. Anyway, she let me have it good a few times last night."

"Sorry," Tara said, looking down.

"It's okay," Kevin said. "I know you didn't mean no harm."

"So have you started looking for her owner yet?"

Kevin sighed and looked over at Tara.

"Kev, this isn't like you found somebody's lost Chihuahua. This is a pet that costs *two million dollars*. There's a waiting list

for sex kittens that runs for six years. You keep her and you're looking at an indictment for grand theft."

"But if I don't, what's she looking at? Being somebody's sex toy for the rest of her life?"

"It's what she was made for. They love sex." He turned to Tara. "Do you like sex?"

"Oh, come on," Kevin said.

Rob waved him to be quiet. "Do you like sex?" he asked again.

After a moment Tara nodded affirmatively.

"Yeah. Do you like all sex?" Kevin asked.

"Not..." She trailed off, looking down. "Not like all people have sex with."

"You have sex with more people than just Master?"

She nodded.

"Do you know all these people?" Rob asked. She shook her head. "You just have sex with them."

Tara bit her lip, then started to cry.

Kevin looked across at Rob. "So you're trying to tell me she's built to be a nymphomaniac? Even if that's true she shouldn't be passed around like a fucking doll."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I dunno. Try to get her fixed up, feed her enough that she ain't starving — I mean, her owner just didn't notice anything about her."

"You can't keep her."

Kevin looked back at Tara. She had not stopped crying, but was looking at him tearfully. He got up and crossed over to the couch, then sat down next to her and took her hand in his own. "Tara. What do you want to happen now?"

"Happen..." She looked up at him. "Find railroad."

"Railroad?" Rob said.

"Yeah. For getting slaves away from their masters. Tara, do you understand what we've been talking about?"

She shook her head.

"Do you like Master?"

Tara's expression grew more sorrowful. "Do anything for Master."

"That sounds like a 'yes,'" Rob said softly.

"Maybe, maybe not." He frowned. "If Master asked you to do something you didn't like, you'd do it?"

She looked blank.

"Sometimes you didn't want to do things he'd want you to, right?"

A nod.

"You tell him you didn't want to?"

A shake this time.

"Did you run away because he asked to do something you didn't want to?"

Tara closed her eyes, trembling.

"Did Master ever hit you?"

A nod again.

"Maybe you could prove abuse," Rob suggested. "Legally they're protected by animal abuse laws."

"Tara's not an animal."

"We're *all* animals, Kev."

"I mean that I think she's... a person."

"She's furry."

"So's my sister."

Rob glared at Kevin for a second, then laughed. "Asshole."

"You like pizza, Tara?"

The GMM was still crying a little. "Hey," Kevin said, wiping away a tear with a finger. "When I picked you up I made a promise to help you."

"It'll be okay," Tara said. "I'll do whatever it takes. I promise."

Kevin blinked. "You got a good memory."

"Good mammarys, too," Rob muttered under his breath.

"Hey!" Kevin whirled around.

"Hey, yourself. It bothers me to admit it, but it's true."

"She's like a little girl," Kevin protested.

"If she gets back in health she'll be like a little girl with measurements of about"—he squinted at her—"maybe 29-22-29 or so. For someone who's only five feet tall, that's hardly 'little.' And I can't believe I'm saying this about a bloody *cat*." He slapped himself. "Ouch."

"Well, I wanna be her friend." He turned back to Tara. "Not

your master, your *friend*. And I'm goin'ta do everything I can to keep that promise to you."

Tara ran a small, pink tongue across her lips (if that was what they should be called), her eyes bigger than ever. Then she nodded. "Okay."

"Good. Now, you like pizza?"

"Yes," she said decisively.

"Okay." He crossed over to the phone, tapping its DIAL button. "9584-7878."

"Hack's Pizza?" Rob said.

"Hey, I like Jack's."

"They have awful pepperoni."

"All the pizza places use fake meat."

"But it's not even *good* fake meat."

After Kevin had ordered, Tara looked up at him. "Fake meat?" she said.

"Yeah. It's not really fake, but some of it's synthetic. You mix in filler stuff with some real meat. I bet your master always got pure meat, right?"

She looked confused.

"She doesn't know that much English," Rob said.

"I don't know. She has a great memory."

"That doesn't mean anything. So do parrots."

"Ate parrot," Tara said, brightening.

"You ate somebody's pet parrot?" Rob asked. "Uh, didn't you know they'd probably get upset about that?"

In a startlingly human gesture, Tara pushed her mane back over her shoulder, staring at him with unfeigned innocence. "Not fake meat," she said after a moment.

Both Kevin and Rob stared at her. "She just made a joke," Rob finally said.

"Should that be surprising?"

"I... don't know."

"I think Tara's as far away from a regular GMM as one of them is from a normal animal. Those articles you saw about sex kittens — any of them say something about really high intelligence?"

"Hold on a minute." Rob picked up the entertainment center's remote and turned on the television. "The library channel is 75, right?"

"I think so."

Rob punched in "75" and the screen cleared, displaying a short menu. It was obvious Rob knew his way around the system; he deftly zipped through the menu levels, entering the reference section, the magazine article index and moving through several submenus to narrow the search key to SEX

KITTEN. After a few seconds, the screen displayed five listings. He selected the article in *Time* for display. The screen divided in half, a large print black-on-white text display taking up the left side and a still photograph on the right.

The picture was captioned "CEO Leininger with Quanta's next generation." In it, a man sat in an old style high-backed desk chair, a wooden desk and plush office in the background. He looked like the archetypal "technology industry" president: in his mid-thirties, wearing a lemon-colored sweater rather than a jacket, fairly attractive glasses over a goofy, boyish grin.

Sitting in his lap was a sex kitten.

Her build was similar to Tara's, or what Tara's would be like if she were well-fed and immaculately groomed. She had pale calico markings, predominantly white, with lush orange hair falling down to the small of her back. The lingerie she wore was nearly transparent, and she had one of her legs between Leininger's and a hand on his sweater, her eyes half-closed and her head on his shoulder, a faint, knowing smile on her face.

"There's something very disturbing about a cat wearing lingerie," Rob said.

"You don't think animals should be wearing sexy clothes?" Kevin said, chuckling a little.

"What's disturbing is that she looks better in it than a lot of humans would. There's just something... wrong about that." He cleared his throat. "Well, let's see here." He started scrolling through the text.

The technology that allows the creation of Genetically Modified Mammals (GMMs) has existed for over three decades. But for the last decade, Quanta Biotechnics has been working on a new type of GMM that outpaces current models in the same way multi-processing workstations overtook traditional computer systems after the turn of the century. Unlike a desktop supercomputer, however, Quanta's AFS Series has not only competitors but Defense Department officials, religious leaders and animal rights activists up in arms.

"What we're doing is really what the industry's been working toward since the first engineered lab rats were patented in the late 1980s," Quanta CEO William Leininger says. "We have been working toward making our creations closer to the human model."

And they certainly are. An AFS (with Quanta's typical dryness, the acronym stands for "Anthropomorphic Feline Sapient") stands five feet high and is completely bipedal, with plantigrade feet, true hands and, perhaps most remarkably, the ability to produce human speech. Quanta even claims an "IQ equivalent" averaging around 80.

The AFS Series has actually been in production for two years, under contract to the Air Force Space Operations unit. Why does the military need fully anthropomorphic

GMMs? There have been references to a kind of nonhuman special operations force, to do jobs humans can't do — or perhaps simply don't want to.

The "Apollo" series AFS does exceed human capability in strength-to-size ratio; the hundred-twenty pound furry soldiers have as much stamina and carrying capacity as a human twice their weight. But criticisms of their cost cannot be ignored even by the program's most ardent supporters; at \$5 million per unit, an AFS soldier would initially cost the military an order of magnitude more than a human soldier would over a four-year stint — and an AFS has to be housed, cared for, and fed just like any other GMM. While the cost could be expected to drop dramatically within the next decade, one AFS "soldier" is never expected to cost less than five times a human soldier would over the same time period.

And, even the most ardent supporters cannot produce an incontrovertible need for nonhuman GIs. With their superhuman stealth and photographic memories, some argue they would be perfect for reconnaissance — yet they are hardly inconspicuous, unless one's enemy is an army of werewolves. In the Old West, where a gun battle was won by hand-to-eye coordination and the speed of the draw, human outlaws would have had little chance against a squadron of furry sheriffs. But in modern combat, where the weapons themselves can aim with the accuracy of a hawk and squeeze off hundreds of rounds in a second, the advantage of a "super soldier" is effectively lost.

But the Apollo is not the only series of AFS. Next month, Quanta plans to introduce the first commercially available anthropomorphic sapients, dubbed the "Ishtar" series.

There are differences between Ishtar and Apollo models. An Ishtar AFS is not much stronger than a human of equivalent weight and height. And unlike the Apollo, the Ishtar is designed as a companion. It can do chores, entertain your children, play games (perhaps even well enough to beat you). But most of all, it is the most sophisticated sex toy ever invented.

"Yes, it's offensive, but even more than that, it's outrageous," charges Cardinal Daniel Daley of New York, one of the Ishtar's most visible (if comparatively soft-spoken) critics. "Whether or not they realize it, what Quanta is doing with these creatures is legitimizing bestiality by making animals that look sexy."

Leininger admits the Ishtars, nicknamed "sex kittens" by the trade press (against Quanta's wishes), are meant as fantasy partners, and that the idea will make a lot of people uncomfortable. "The church has been against sexual fantasies since the Crucifixion," he says. "If it's physically pleasurable, it must be immoral. Any fantasy is dangerous to those who want to maintain a strict authority; we didn't expect backing from the National

Council of Churches here.

"But look at virtual reality sex," he continues. "It's become one of the most popular forms of entertainment. You don't speak of it in respectable company, but the money VR firms are making with those programs speaks for itself.

"What we're doing is simply responding to a very real market demand. People are still having sexual fantasies, and I think they'd rather realize them with a real, caring and willing partner than with a computer simulation. They'll do what you want with no risk."

Daley responds, "That doesn't address the question of whether we should be encouraging these fantasies at all. What about sexual responsibility? What he's saying is that if you're rich and bored, you should go out and buy a concubine. It says that the only reason to be sexually responsible is to avoid catching a fatal disease."

Legally, sex with an AFS does not qualify as bestiality in most states. Why? The common legal definition of animal is "any living dumb creature." The AFS series can talk; therefore, they are not animals. (This raises the issue of whether or not a GMM who speaks with American Sign Language qualifies as an animal under current bestiality laws.)

Interestingly, this is not the legal definition of "animal" set by the National Animal Protection Act, which defines them simply as "nonhuman vertebrates." This law was passed after the first commercial GMMs had been produced.

John Pennington, one of NAPA's architects, feels the legal discrepancy is a serious problem. "What we basically have is a situation where a GMM's legal status is whatever best benefits its producers. Quanta doesn't want its clients prosecuted for bestiality, so the AFS series aren't animals. But they don't want their new species to fall under, say, child protection laws, because those guidelines are much stricter than NAPA's. So now they're animals again." (Legally, child protection laws would only apply to human children even if the AFS models did not fall under NAPA's umbrella.)

Pennington is one of a growing number of activists who feel that GMMs require a new set of laws to protect them, distinct from traditional animal protection laws. "The old, arbitrary ways of blocking animals from basic rights humans have fall down like dominoes when you get to this stage," he maintains. "You have animals that can talk. Not mimic speech, but actually talk and understand what they're saying and what's being said to them. Making sure they have enough water and food and bathing them once a week no longer cuts it. People used to ridicule animal rights by saying, 'Next you're going to give them the right to vote.' We've approached the point where that's no longer so funny."

George Bukovsky, Chief Design Engineer at Atlanta

Genetics Group, the world's largest producer of GMMs, disagrees. "They're still animals. Making them a little better at certain tasks doesn't give them the capability to understand human society. The most advanced GMM in the world, and this includes Quanta AFS types, isn't going to sit down and write a good sonnet or paint a masterpiece. It won't be able to carry on a real conversation."

The "for show" Ishtar AFS, pictured here with Leininger, certainly suggests merit in Bukovsky's criticism. "Carol" has a vocabulary of thousands of words and enjoys having stories read to her. But she shows little signs of understanding her surroundings, except as they directly affect her — much like any less advanced cat. She is friendly but has trouble keeping interest in conversations, and spent most of her time at Quanta's unveiling flirting with members of the press.

In the long run, this may point to the most important practical question about the AFS. Purely physical relationships have always been part of the human experience, surviving the twists and turns of Victorian prudishness, the "sexual revolution" and even HIV, the longest and most destructive plague in recorded history. But such relationships are transitory by nature. After the outcry dies and the novelty wears off, will any but the most jaded hedonists be willing to pay sixty thousand dollars a year — AFS models are only available through lease, not outright purchase — for a mistress they may not be able to talk to out of bed?

"An Ishtar AFS will have almost the same physical appearance for the first forty years of his or her life," Leininger says. "We don't expect a lessor to keep one for more than two or three years. Fantasies don't last forever."

"That's the end of that article," Rob said, "and I'm hoarse as hell." He switched back to the title index. "There are a few more recent entries."

"Save 'em for later," Kevin said. "Fantasies, huh?" He looked over at Tara, who had been listening to Rob's reading attentively. "What do you think of all that?"

Tara cocked her head, but said nothing.

"You were listening, weren't you?" Rob said. "She's not going to have much interest in that."

"For God's sake, man, she was watching a damned Civil War documentary," Kevin snapped. "If all they're interested in is sex then tell me how she got here. Tell me how she called up that fucking program and understood enough of it to decide she needed the underground railroad. Those were her words. Not mine. Tell me that."

Rob pursed his lips, then shook his head.

The doorbell rang. "Tara, you should probably stay out of sight." She dropped to all fours behind the couch as Kevin opened the door.

"Pizza," he called back to Rob as he saw who it was.

As they sat down, Rob said, "If you don't call someone about Tara soon, then eventually you're going to answer the door and it's going to really be the police."

"Nobody knows I have her. Tara, you can eat. You don't have to wait for me."

She looked over at him and hesitantly picked up a slice of pizza, glancing at him again before starting to eat it.

"Well, she's already got to have been reported missing."

"So what do you think I should do?"

Rob considered. "I honestly don't know, guy. Like I said, this is grand theft. Even if she's been abused, you're not qualified as a legal guardian.

"What I think you're going to need to do is get an abuse investigator out here to look at her and verify she was abused. But I don't know if we haven't any physical injuries on her, except for the damage she did to herself running away.

"Tara, can you remember any time your master abused you?"

"Stupid bitch," she said angrily. "You scratch me like that again and it'll be your chest."

"What?"

Tara screamed as if in mortal pain, dropping her pizza, and grabbed her left hand in her right, pulling it to her and starting to cry.

"It's okay," Kevin said quickly, reaching for her. She backed away, still screaming. "It's just me. Kevin. It's okay." He got her in his arms. She struggled for a second, then collapsed against him, shaking and sniffling.

He gently took her left hand and examined it. "Look at this," he said after a second.

Rob came over and examined the little scar he had found, a thin line with two bumps on either end.

"You know what could have caused that?"

"Yeah, I might. I saw a scar like that before, when I was on a summer construction job in college. The foreman had one."

"What's it from?"

"An electric stapling gun."

"Shit." Kevin held Tara in his arms until she stopped sniffling.

"You okay?"

She nodded, but didn't move.

"That specific enough?" he asked Rob.

"Yeah. As long as — " He broke off, looking thoughtful.

"As long as what?"

"As long as they listen to her."

"I don't follow."

"Think of child abuse cases where the child testifies as to what happened. Defense attorneys will still call that into question, saying that the child must have been coached, he doesn't understand what he's saying, all sorts of things to call the kid's credibility into question."

"So imagine what they're going to try to do in an animal abuse case where the only evidence comes from the animal. Especially one bred to do anything to please a human."

"Maybe they won't have to ask her. Be just like a normal animal abuse thing. They might find things we missed."

"You know, we should probably look at that foot again. A hole through it might need more than a bandage."

"I used some of that spray on it."

"I know, but you're gonna have to be cleaning and changing every day. And putting on that spray every day."

"Every day, huh?" Kevin looked down at Tara. "As long as you're here, Rob, why don't you put on the spray?"



CHARACTER © 2011
CHRIS GRANT

TP
RWB



NITROCOON

Story and Script by
AVI MELMAN

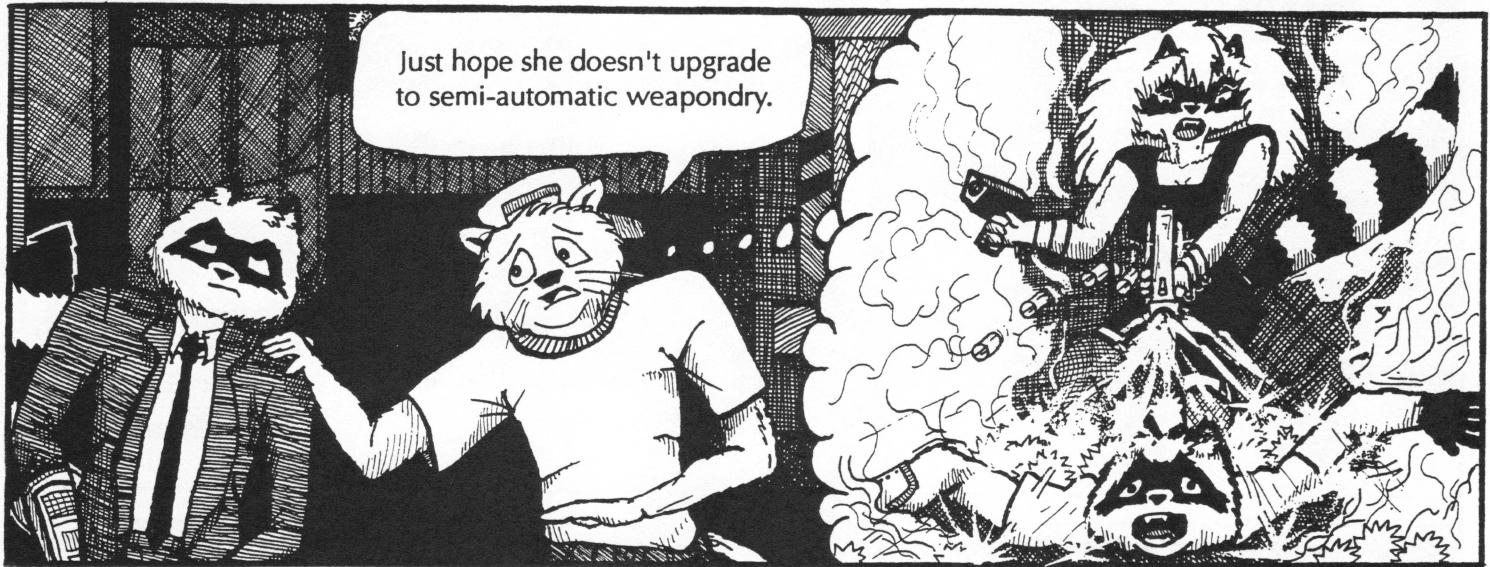
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Art and Layouts by
ROBERT MENDOZA



Dragon Night

PART THREE



Galactic Security is the defence force for the Federation of Unified Worlds. Its headquarters is located in the basement of the Cyber Dome. Its main entrance is located behind the snack stand. The Cyber Dome, once Tri-Point's most popular sports arena, has now been mysteriously transformed into a giant stone monolith. Dr. Styx is GalSec's commander-in-chief. His word could start an inter-galactic war. But he's smarter than that.

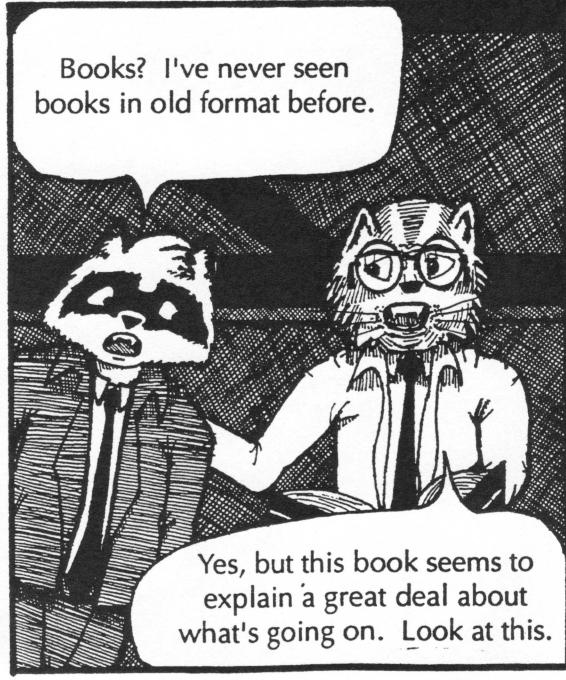
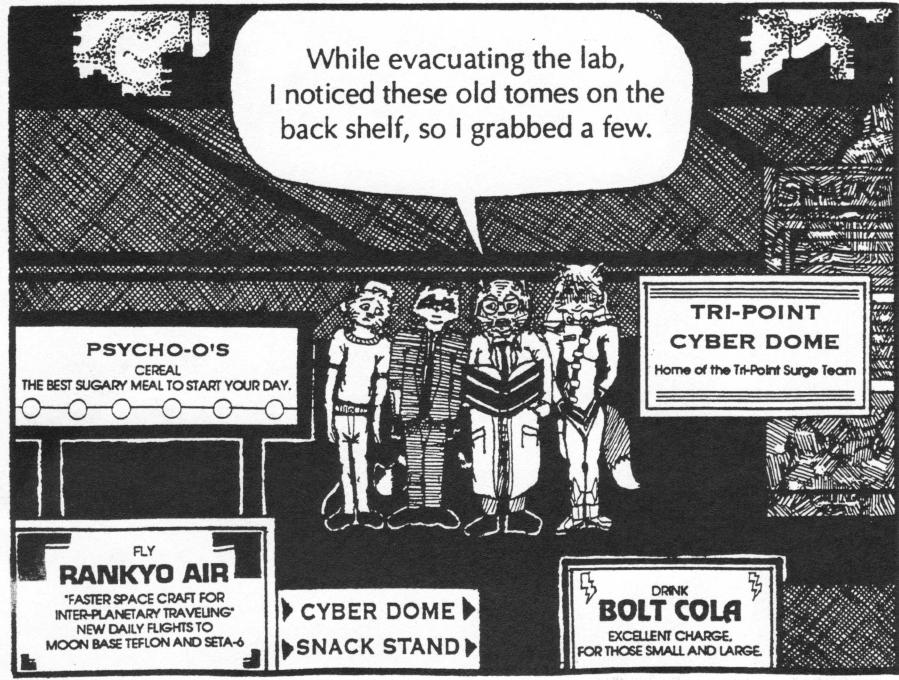
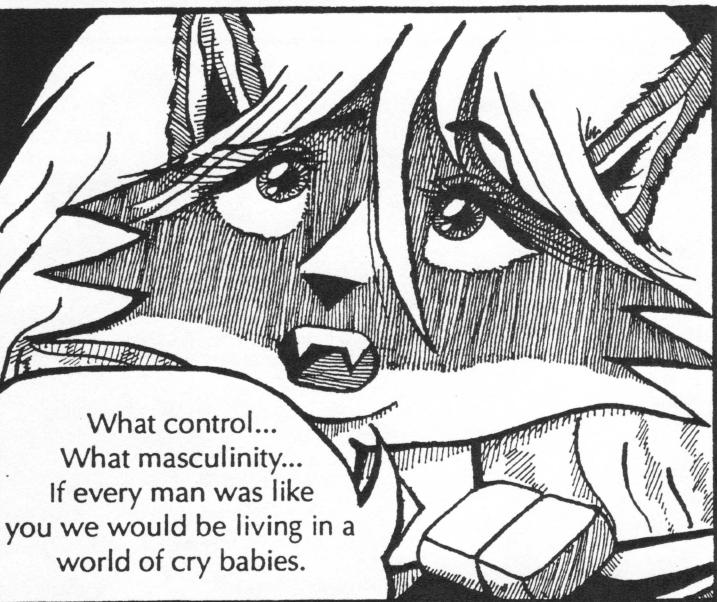




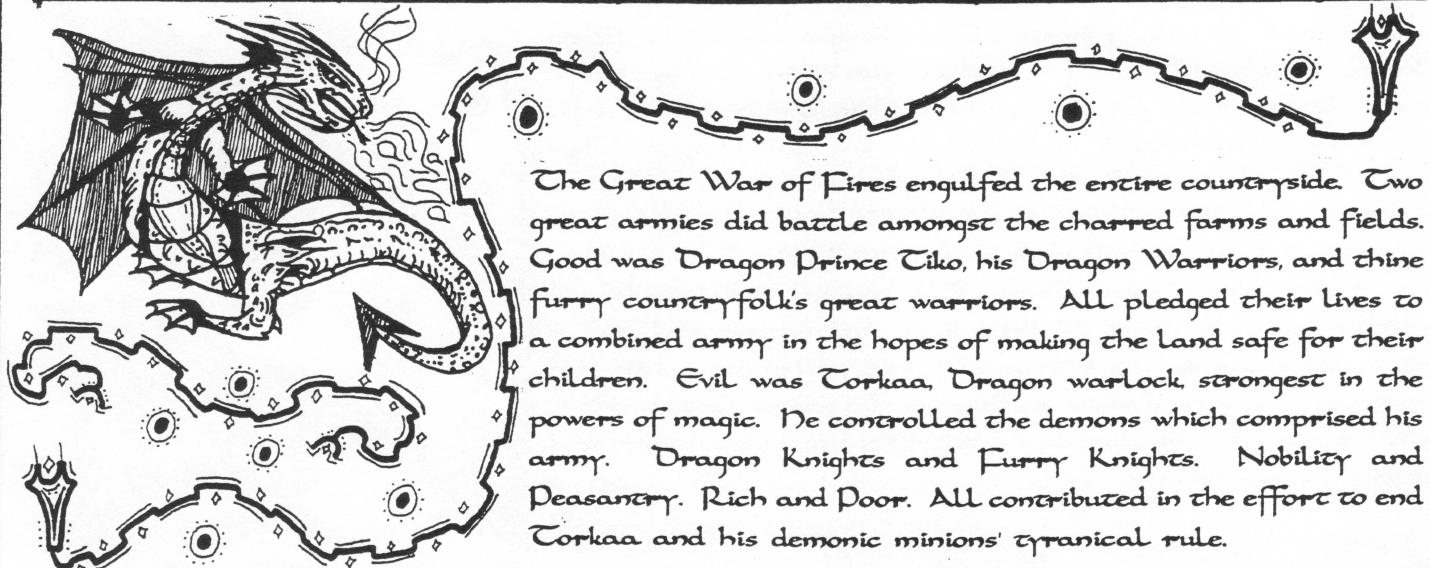
You're overacting, dude.

I AM NOT!!

I loved this place.



The Great War of Fire



The Great War of Fires engulfed the entire countryside. Two great armies did battle amongst the charred farms and fields. Good was Dragon Prince Tiko, his Dragon Warriors, and thine fury countryfolk's great warriors. All pledged their lives to a combined army in the hopes of making the land safe for their children. Evil was Torkaa, Dragon warlock, strongest in the powers of magic. He controlled the demons which comprised his army. Dragon Knights and Fury Knights. Nobility and Peasantry. Rich and Poor. All contributed in the effort to end Torkaa and his demonic minions' tyrannical rule.

The Great War of Fire



The greatest and most prominent Furry Knight was Kor'na of clan Docona. The clan Docona are as old as can be recalled by printed tomes. Docona stood for righteousness. Clan Docona helped those in trouble. Philanthropic in nature were the clan Docona. They gave gold to the poor, food to the hungry, tools to the rebuilders. Large was clan Docona, they were hundreds, spread throughout the countryside. They controlled much of the land which Torkaa wished for. Kor'na and Dragon Prince Tiko became good friends, and together, as allies, dealt the final blow that decimated Torkaa's demon army during the Battle of Korke. The two polar orbs controlled all magic and straineth under the forces. Good and Evil were both torn asunder and at the end of the war magic disappeared from the lands forever.

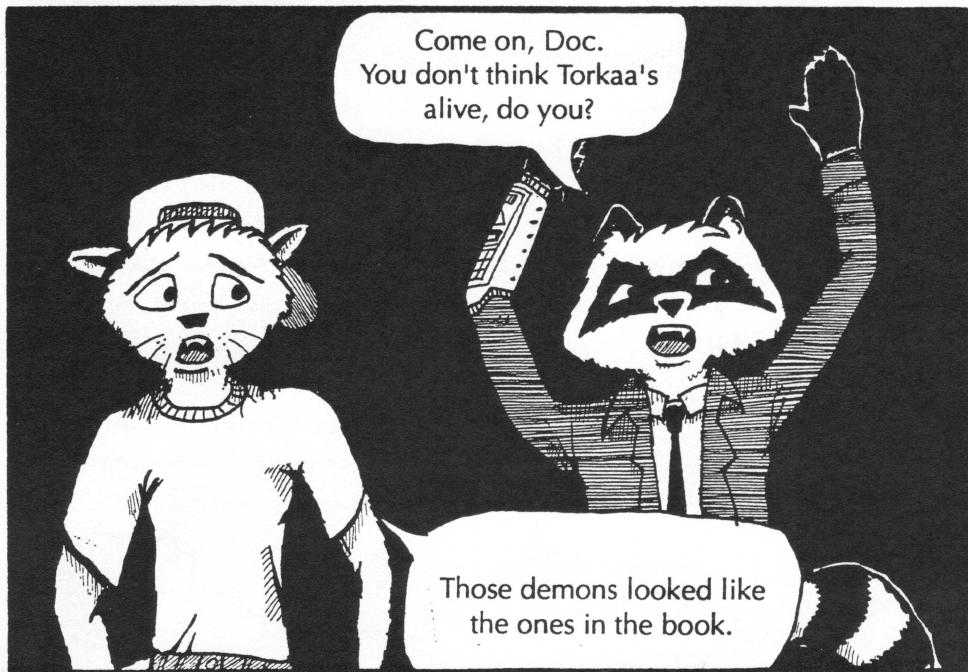
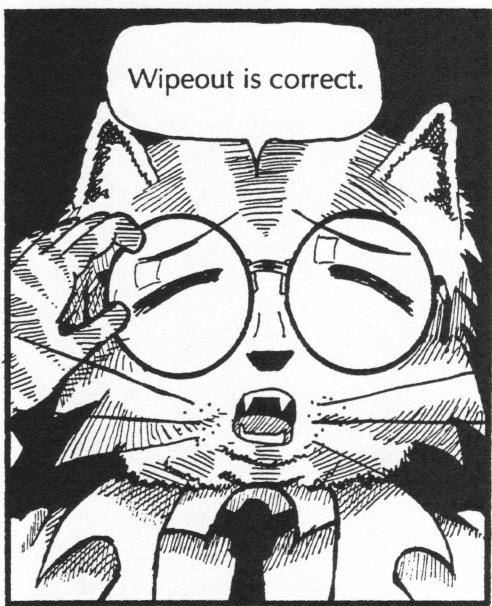


The Great War of Fire



But Torkaa hath an ultimate plan. Magic was thine important factor. Before his defeat he made an oath and swore vengeance on all. He would return in a day when all past had long been forgotten. He would cast an ultimate spell that would preserve Torkaa's realm in a magic field within which time would never advance. Then he would incant a spell which would return everything to his days as ruler. It would be his second chance. But, to incant this spell, he required a puppet ruler; one with such beauty, to be able to entrance all. After his defeat Torkaa and his realm disappeared from the countryside. None know if he ever did initiate his final plan before being vanquished.





Don't act stupid, boy.

Well... how feasible is it
REALLY?

He's your ancestor. It fits.

I don't go for fairy tales.

TRY
RANKYO MARES
FASTEST HORSES FOR LONG DISTANCE
TRAVELING. NEW WEEKLY RIDES TO
RURAL OUTPOST TETLONA AND SETTERS RANCH

CIDER DOME
SNACK STAND

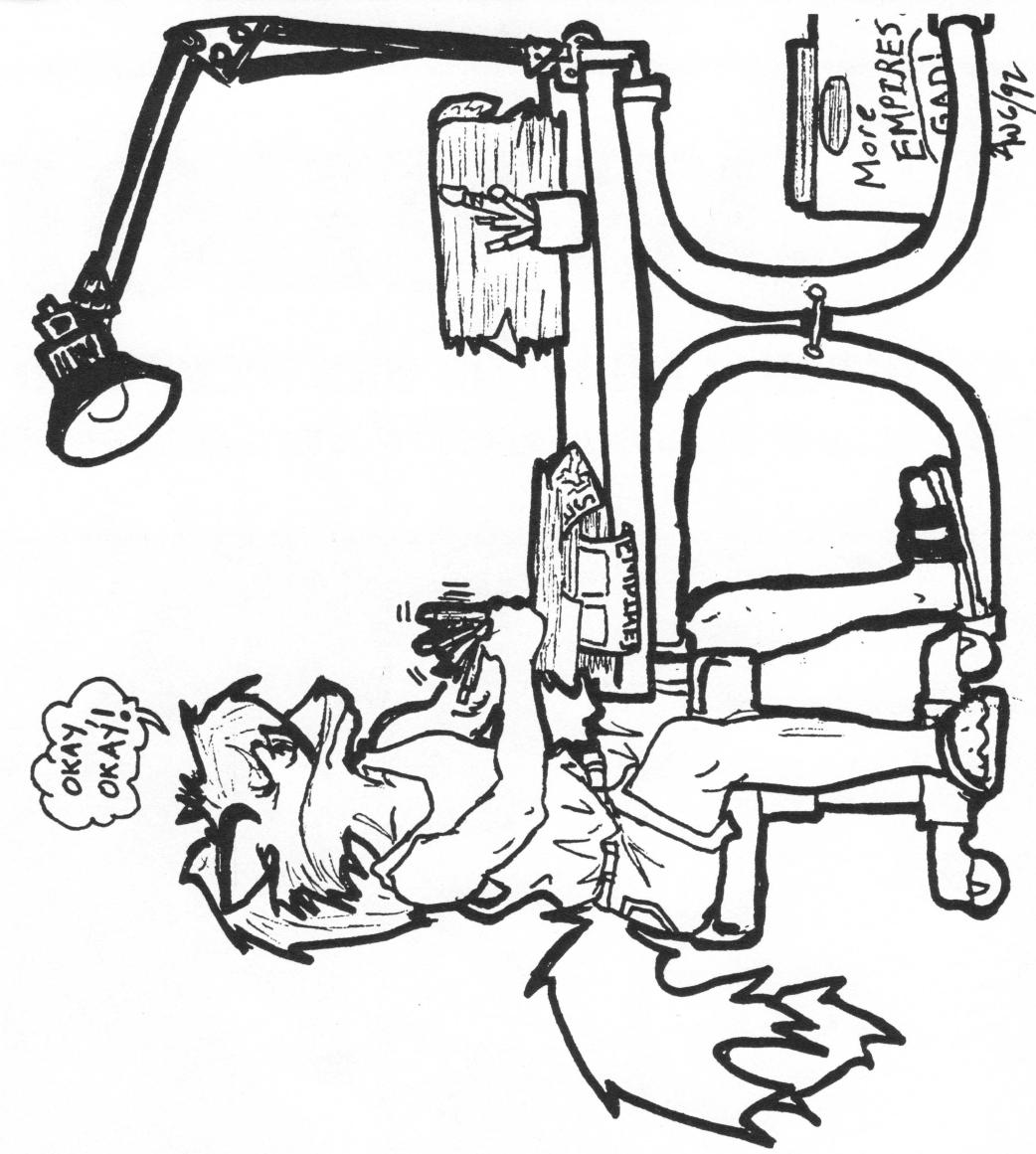
DRINK
HOLT ALE
HEARTY BREW.
COMBINED BARLEY AND HOP STEW.

I don't think you have a choice...



CHRIS GRANT ASKS HIS GIRLFRIEND
TO INK SOME OF EMPIRES...

I SAID,
I INK!!



Actually, folks, I consider myself lucky. Mr. Grant hasn't resorted to this yet...

WORMHOLES

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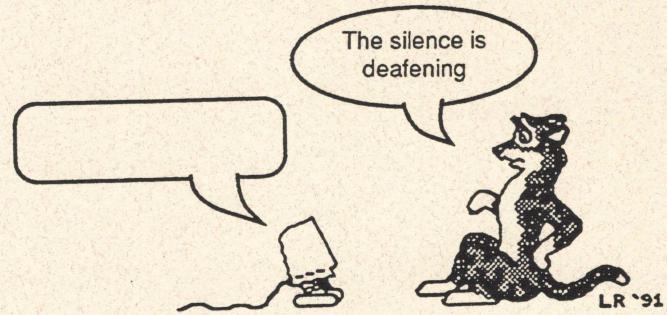
The Last Bits

DISPATCHES FROM THE ELECTRONIC FRONT

Remember you can always reach us at:

krisk@apple.com, from the Internet.

This is Kris Kreutzman's account at Apple. He will answer your questions if he is not too busy with work, so please be patient.



"Is there anybody out there?" — Pink Floyd, *The Wall*

For some time, we've been hearing bits and rumors telling us that "The Last Bits" is badly out of date, but only a little new information accompanies these otherwise unhelpful comments. As there seems to be a distinct lack of interest, we are seriously considering discontinuing "The Last Bits" unless we are suddenly flooded with updated data and indications of interest....

— The Management

Here is what information we *have* received:

Steven Stadnicki reports that FurryMuck is currently at 138.74.0.10, port 8888; the contact address has changed to U58601 @uicum.uic.edu

...he also tells us that Tapestries has moved to 128.95.10.106, port 2069 and believes that the contact address is the same as it was before.

Thanks, Steven. ☺

CENTAURS GATHERUM

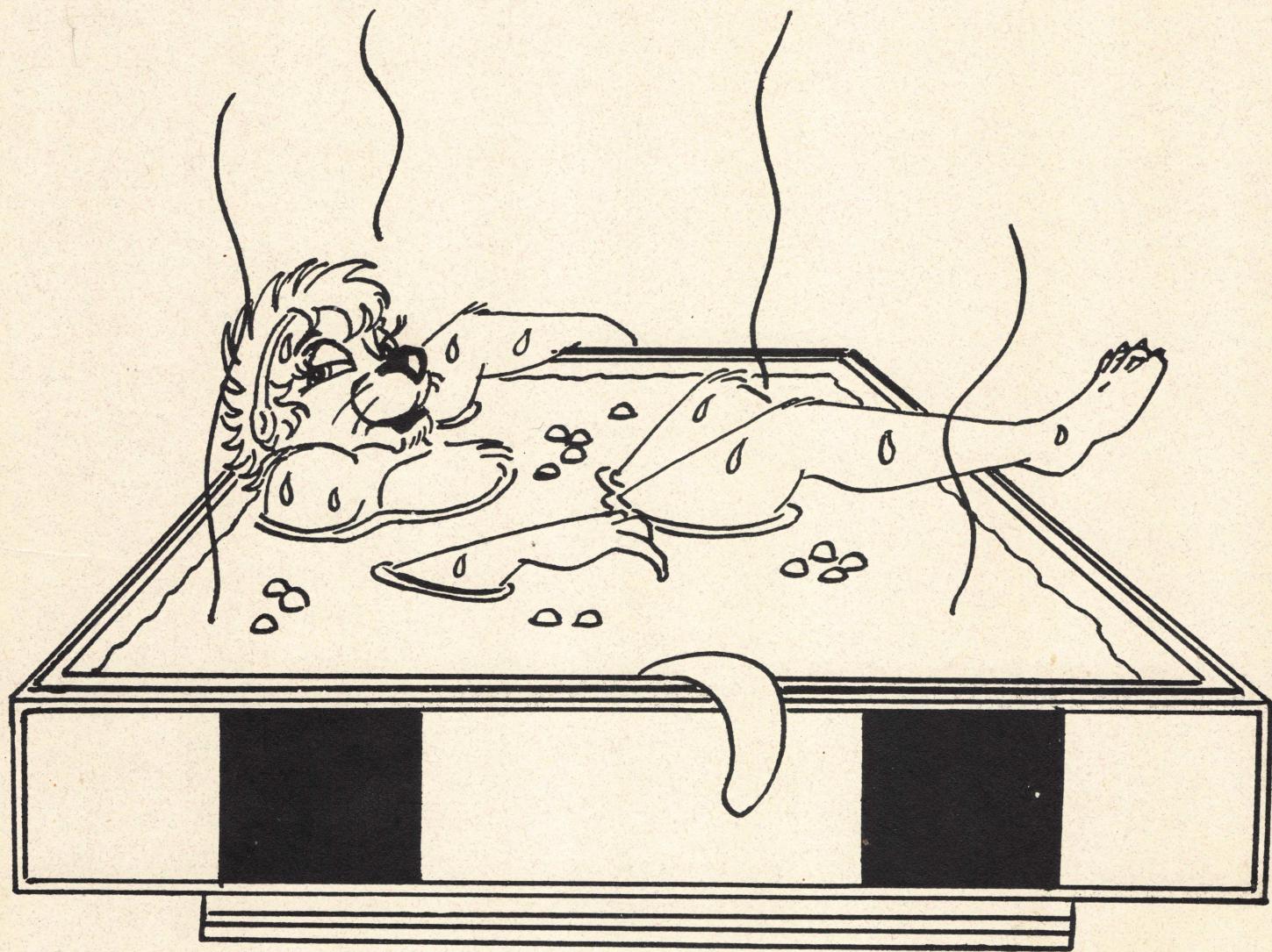
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